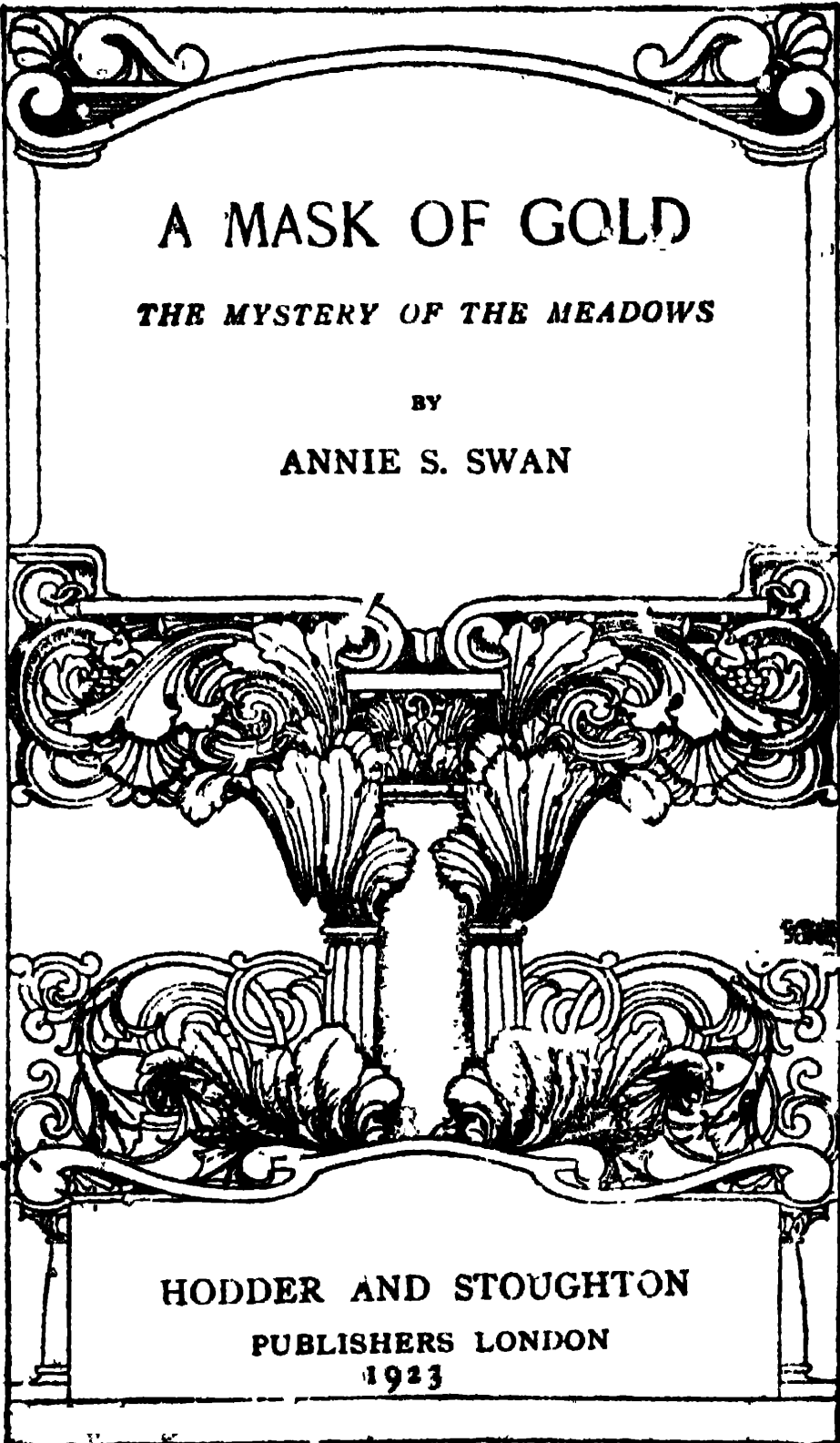




A MASK OF GOLD

THE MYSTERY OF THE MEADOWS

BY

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CHAPTER I

FELLOW-TRAVELLERS

THE Edinburgh coach from Carlisle came along the level high road in fine style ; whip cracking, horn blowing, and dashed up to the inn door at Blenkenfoot, a lonely stopping place hidden among the fastnesses of the Lanark hills.

It was a grey day, the last of November, the mist creeping stealthily down from the hills to the brooding valleys, the air, however, soft and warm so that the passengers had no reason to complain of the rigours of the weather, which made winter travelling in these regions an experience to be remembered perhaps but scarcely repeated.

From Carlisle to Lockerbie the inside passengers had numbered but four ; at the latter place two jolly drovers had joined them, but took the box seat beside the driver, where they conversed in very loud tones concerning the winter prospects for stock.

Within, an elderly gentleman, muffled in greatcoat and furs until he had made himself resemble a mummy, had been a source of ribald amusement to two fresh schoolboys travelling to their home in Edinburgh for the Christmas holidays, a week earlier than usual on account of an epidemic at their school. The other was a lady, young and attractive, who had friends with the lads directly they started from Carlisle, and had beguiled the tedium of the journey with wonderful tales of tiger hunting in the Indian

jungle, with which she seemed to have great familiarity. She was a soldier's daughter, and had been much of a wanderer, though this was her first visit to Scotland, the land of her birth.

When the tooting horn sent a thousand echoes reverberating among the quiet hills, a young man, who had been reading his newspaper in the coffee-room of the inn, leaped to his feet, and ran to the door, together with all the other inmates of the house, to whom the passing of the coach was the event of the day. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, dressed in the garb of a farmer of the better class. He had a handsome open face, tanned with the healthy outdoor life, and a free, frank manner, which won him friends everywhere. He was well known at the Blenkenfoot Inn, and the landlord addressed him with familiar respect.

"The young gentlemen's no' stopping off, Mr. Traquair?" he said inquiringly.

"Not this time. I shall be going to town for Christmas, I expect. There they are, the rogues, to the fore as usual!"

They tumbled pell-mell from the coach before it stopped, careless of the prancing horses, which were with difficulty restrained as they were sharply drawn up, and the next moment they were hanging about Traquair's knees.

"I knew you'd come!" said the younger of the two, a lad of ten with the face of an angel, but a very imp of mischief withal. "Uncle Jack, how many foals are there at White's Moss? Alec says only four, but I'm sure Elsie said there were seven."

"Wrong both; I've nine this time, sonny. How are you, Alec, and what sort of a journey have you had?"

"Rippin', she told us no end of yarns!" he said, with a backward jerk of his thumb in the direction of the young lady who had now alighted and stood looking round the lonely hill-encircled spot with a wondering interest. Traquair, seeing her thus absorbed, had a good

opportunity of studying her face, which pleased him well. Also he observed that she wore the deepest mourning, which gave indication of her forlorn state. When she turned her head and looked at them he raised his cap.

"I hope my nephews have not worried you, madam," he said. "I know what imps they are."

She smiled brightly, and her eyes, large, grey and pathetic, were wonderfully lightened thereby.

"Oh, no, thank you, they have been very good. I have enjoyed their company; it has made the journey less tedious. How long before we reach Edinburgh?"

"Two hours. But you are supposed to dine, country fashion here. May I ask you to join us?"

She hesitated only a moment. The friendly tones of his voice and his general appearance pleased Alice Harman no less than hers pleased him. She thanked him, and they entered the long, low coffee-room whence now came an appetising odour of many good things.

The old gentleman, having divested himself of some of his superfluous clothing, followed them in, and seated himself at the end of the table farthest from the merry little party. He nevertheless kept his eye on them and carried away with him a very vivid memory of Alice Harman's face, a memory which, as it happened, was to stand her in good stead in the day of her trouble. She was lonely and sad enough that day in all truth, but had no idea of the depths of misery and tragedy possible in this life, and of which she was destined to have her full share.

Tranquair was quietly attentive to her, and in the course of casual conversation learned that she was an orphan, the daughter of an officer who had died at Colchester, and that she was journeying to Edinburgh to make her home with an aunt in George Square, her mother's only sister.

In return, he confided to her that he was himself Edinburgh born, the son of a professional man, but that he had preferred country life, and was farming on

his own account about four miles from Blenkenfoot, and that the lads were the sons of his sister, the wife of a well-known and much-respected merchant in the city.

"And if you will permit me to write to her she will call on you," he said anxiously, as the time drew near for the coach to depart. "You would like her, I am sure; everybody does. And I am coming myself soon."

Alice shook her head with a slight, sad smile.

"You are most kind, but I am not even sure of a welcome where I am going, and may not be able to receive friends. Yes, thank you, I will take the address, and, if it is possible, I will take advantage of your kindness."

"I come to town for Christmas and the New Year, and will hope to meet you," said Traquair earnestly. "Good-bye, Miss Harman. Look after her, boys."

The old gentleman, standing a little apart, watched this little scene and overheard the expressed solicitude of the young man with a faint smile on his lips which lingered for the rest of the journey, and caused him to regard the trio of his fellow-passengers with a friendly interest, but he did not speak a word.

The hour of the coach's arrival at Edinburgh was quite well known to all who cared to make inquiry; nevertheless, when it reached the stopping place and they alighted, Alice looked round in vain for some one to greet her. The lads were met by their father, who, seeing her evidently somewhat at a loss, stepped forward, and asked whether he could direct her.

"I wish to go to George Square," she answered. "I have no luggage, it is coming by sea. Is it far? Could I walk, or is it necessary to take a carriage?"

"It is very wet, you can't possibly walk," he said decidedly. "Will you permit me to drop you at your address? It is very little out of our way as we drive home."

Alice thanked him, and accepted at once. The same frank, kindly manner which had attracted her to

Traquair was characteristic of his brother-in-law; they seemed genial folk, always willing to show kindness when opportunity offered. He took pains as they drove to point out the beauties of Edinburgh, which, however, were seen under heavy disadvantage, through a thick haze. In a surprisingly short time they rolled into the quiet seclusion of George Square, and Alice was deposited before the door of the number she sought. Her new friend waited until he saw her admitted by a lean-visaged, sour-looking man-servant, and then drove off, somewhat haunted by the sweetness of her face.

"I am Miss Harman," said Alice, with a slight touch of hauteur, somehow resenting the look and manner of the man, which were certainly not as respectful as they might have been. "Please tell Miss Dempster at once that I have arrived."

She pointed to her travelling bag, which she had deposited on the floor, but Meikle did not offer to touch it. Alice was not aware, of course, that this was part of a concerted plan on the part of the household to show her how unwelcome she was.

"My mistress is expecting ye," he said ungraciously; "this way."

She followed him across the large bare hall, which had yet a certain severe dignity of its own, and into a small room apparently curtained off from a larger one. It was the library of the house, communicating with the dining-room by folding-doors.

In a high-backed chair, drawn very close to a dull, smouldering fire, sat an old woman, with a thin, high-bred face, extraordinarily pale and emaciated, her long, thin hands, encased in black mittens, folded on her knee above a stiff black silk apron. A cap of black lace rested on her iron grey hair, and somewhat softened the harsh outline of her face. When the door opened, and Meikle, in a sepulchral voice, announced Miss Harman, she gripped her ebony stick and rose to her feet.

It was a moment of undoubted strain. They re-

garded one another for a second or two, the old woman and the young, with a searching look. If there had been any lingering hope in the girl's heart that here she might perchance find some substitute for a fond mother, whom she scarcely remembered, it was quickly quenched. There was not even a smile on the withered, austere face as one shaking hand was outstretched.

"So you've come. Sit down; I hope you had a good journey."

"Thank you, Aunt Katherine," the girl replied, but did not offer to sit down.

"You're not cold, I suppose?" said the old lady sharply, imagining some glance of disapproval at the dull fire. "It has been made up for the afternoon, and lasts till bedtime. I take my tea at five o'clock, it will soon be here."

Again Alice did not speak. Her reception seemed to chill her to the very marrow. She could have cried out in sheer derision of the faint hopes of home she had permitted herself to cherish. The small, mean, emaciated figure, from which all the warmth of life and feeling seemed to have fled, the smouldering fire, the bare, cold room, the dull prison-like house—were these to be the future boundaries of a life that had loved the sunshine?

"You are very like your mother," said Miss Dempster, in a low voice, "only her eyes were dark."

"My father had grey eyes; and oh, how I loved him!" she cried, the pent-up feelings bursting forth in spite of herself.

"He served me and mine ill," said the old lady, with averted eyes, "but he may have been kind to you."

The tension was broken by the loud ringing of the front door bell, and almost immediately Meikle, in a pompous voice, announced Mr. Ruthven.

An elderly man, close shaven except for mutton-chop whiskers, which gave a very shrewd, keen face a somewhat benevolent look, came briskly into the room.

Alice at once turned to go, but her aunt detained her to go through the form of introduction to Mr. Ruthven, whom she described, with a curious touch of facetiousness, as her friend and legal adviser.

"Glad to see you, my dear young lady," he said fussily. "A long journey for one so young and attractive to take, eh? But times are changed. Young ladies are so very clever and self-reliant nowadays, not ready to drop like a ripe plum into the arms of every adventurer, ha! ha!"

"Don't be a fool, Patrick," said the old lady, with extraordinary acerbity. "My niece is not accustomed to such brothers. Ring the bell twice, Alice, and my woman, Dalglish, will attend."

The bell brought Dalglish with such rapidity that Ruthven concluded she had been very near the outside of the door. She was a tall, black-browed woman about fifty-seven, with a sullen, forbidding face. She positively glared upon the girl, as she listened while her mistress gave orders concerning her room. Alice on her part scarcely looked at the woman. She had not, hitherto, given much thought to servants, and had always been able to obtain their willing service by her kind consideration. That any paid attendant should cherish hatred against her, or resent her presence, would have seemed impossible. But she was on the threshold of many dark experiences.

She followed the angular figure of Dalglish up two long flights of stairs to what she afterwards discovered to be the servants' quarters, and there a little bare room, destitute of the smallest comfort, was pointed out to her as her own.

"You may go," she said haughtily to the woman, suddenly becoming aware of her hostility.

Dalglish turned away. Alice closed and locked the door.

CHAPTER II

"LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON"

WHEN the lawyer left the house about an hour later he walked slowly, with his head bent, apparently deep in thought. His interview with Miss Dempster had not been satisfactory, and the sight of a clergyman, who had been leaving the house as he entered it, had seriously disturbed him.

Hitherto Miss Dempster had kept all the cloth at bay, not even attending any church, and railing at the clergy for self-seeking and hypocrisy. It had the more seriously annoyed Ruthven that he had recognised the one who had been fortunate in gaining admittance as one of the greatest preachers and philanthropists of his day, who had helped to add lustre to the fame of the city where he laboured. Then the arrival of 'Alice' Harman was another thorn in his flesh. It was decidedly against his interests to have a stranger in the house, and his shrewd eye had not failed to note the fact that the newcomer was not likely to be a weakling but a woman capable of observing and judging for herself.

People who had lived on their wits, as he had been led to believe of the Harmans, were bound to become shrewd and far-sighted. He was himself a case in point. When he reached George IV. Bridge he seemed to take a sudden thought, and wheeling round, crossed the Square at an angle, and came out upon the South Bridge, and so to Nicolson Street, where, in a modest

but substantial ground floor, his only son carried on the practice of his profession. A neat and not aggressive plate announced to all whom it might concern that Patrick Claud Ruthven, physician and surgeon, was available within. Ruthven's loud peal at the knocker brought the young doctor himself to the door, looking surprised to receive a visit from his father during his own business hours. Ruthven's son was a tall, loosely built young man, with somewhat sloping shoulders and a weak, but not unpleasant, face, adorned by a straggling beard of a reddish colour, lately grown in order to increase his apparently meagre professional chances. He wore glasses over his light blue eyes, and had a studious look, more assumed than genuine, however, he having been known at college as a notorious chronic, who had spent thirteen years in vain and endeavours to pass the needful examinations. It was popularly reported that at last the examiners had put him through to get rid of him.

He had lost no time in setting up housekeeping on his own account. He was the only son of a late marriage, and his mother had died at his birth. So he had always been a lonely lad, with none to guide him in the right way. Between his father and himself there was a kind of rough companionship, but Ruthven the elder secretly despised the lad, and thought he lacked brains.

So far Patrick Ruthven's patients were but two in number—Miss Dempster, his father's old client, and an old servant, who expected to be attended for nothing. He paid visits as regularly as he dared to Miss Dempster, who had no serious objection to him, but seemed amused at his professional attempts; but she only saw him when the spirit moved her, and poured his nostrums down the sink, doctoring herself secretly with herbal remedies purchased from a despised quack in the Causeway-side.

She had been very kind to him, however, paying the most of his college fees in the past, and setting him up

in his own house when the time came. He gathered from his father's expression that afternoon that something had happened to annoy him.

"You've been at George Square, I suppose, or I shouldn't have the honour of a visit from you. Anything fresh happened?"

"She's come," he replied gloomily. "Lily Dempster's daughter, I mean. Shut the door and let's talk."

His son obeyed him, and when they were closeted in the dining-room he turned to his father with lively interest.

"So she's come, has she? Well, what's the verdict?"

"Looks a madam. Handsome, well-bred, with that turn of the head which marks birth. And she has a pair of remarkably wide-open eyes. It won't be easy to throw dust in them, Patrick. I'm telling you the worst to begin with."

"Good plan; but you make me keen to see her. Wonder whether I could in decency make an excuse to visit the old lady to-day?"

The old lawyer spread out his fingers in expressive disgust.

"Make an excuse? Why, there's none needed. You're disappointing me, Pat. If I'd been in your shoes, I would have had my feet firmly planted there before now, I can assure you."

The doctor instantly assumed a somewhat aggrieved look.

"It's all very well, dad, but you're privileged, you know. I've done my little best, but when one calls time after time, to be informed by that weasel Meikle that the old lady isn't at home, at the same time having the felicity of beholding her through the window sitting in her usual place, one's eagerness to be of service to her, cools off a bit, naturally."

"It isn't a question of serving her, you idiot, but of serving ourselves. I tell you, Pat, we'll have to redouble our attention now, or we may find ourselves

playing a losing game, for she's clever—the young one—and she may get round the old lady."

"I should think it unlikely," replied the son confidently. "Why, old Kate is resenting her coming with all her might, even going to make her to do a servant's work, isn't she?"

"She won't do it," answered Ruthven. "She'll get round the old dame's soft side, or I'm much mistaken."

"Has she got one? If so, where?" asked Pat, with that facetious touch on which he sometimes prided himself. But his father did not respond to what he imagined to be a necessary part of a good bedside manner.

"Never depress your patient," he was fond of remarking, but was apt to err on the other side, an aggressive cheerfulness not being appreciated always by one in deep depression.

"Be sensible, Pat, if you can for once. You don't seem to realise the seriousness of this," his father said, warningly. "I can tell you I'm pretty sick over it."

"But we sit tight, don't we?" he asked, slightly alarmed.

"In the meantime, yes, everything will come our way. If only old Kate had pegged out before the young one came, we'd have been as right as trivets. After all that's come and gone, it would be hard luck to be pushed out by that baggage."

"I think you are taking the gloomy view."

"Do you? Wait till you've seen her. She's the living image of what Lily Dempster was when she ran away with a penniless Irish subaltern at Edinburgh Castle, only she's got his carriage and his eyes, which drove half the women wild. And her breeding will please the old lady. She'll even enjoy being defied, as she will be. Oh, I tell you, you should wait till you know as much about women as I do before you venture to pass an opinion."

Pat appeared momentarily shubbed—at least he held his tongue.

"And what troubles me most," pursued the lawyer, "is that it is you who have the situation in hand. Her affairs being practically wound up, I haven't any excuse for calling, except occasionally, in a friendly way, but somebody will need to be on the spot. That somebody must be you, Pat. D'ye hear?"

"But if she won't see me, what then?"

"Don't send in your name with Meikle. He's like the rest—got his own axe to grind. You walk straight in, as if you'd been sent for. And once in, you're a poor chip of the old block if you can't put an old woman in a good humour."

Patrick looked enlightened, but made no remark.

"I tell you, if we don't look out, others will. Who d'ye think I met on the steps this afternoon as I went up to the door?"

"Couldn't say."

"Dr. Guthrie!"

Pat whistled loud and long.

"You don't mean it. But had he been in? I thought the old lady kept that tribe severely on the outside?"

"She did see him, and, I believe, gave him money, too, but I couldn't get the old girl to own up, but she seemed pleased with him. If that tribe, as you call them, gets in, we're practically done for. I've seen old women get religion at the last minute before this, and scatter their means in a sinful way. It's got to be stopped."

"By me," observed Pat, with a wry face.

His father tranquilly nodded.

"You must be in season and out of season, understand. Make yourself indispensable to the old girl."

"I'd be much obliged for a few hints," he said, plaintively. "We don't hit it off just very well at present. I've always the feeling that the old girl has no confidence in me, and that she pours my drugs down the sink."

"Not so bad as that, and she does like you, Pat. Do you suppose it was for my sake she paid up so well when you were wasting at college?"

"Thought it was."

"Well, you're wrong, and she always promised to be your first patient. You've to convince her that she is ill, and needing your constant attendance, and if you don't succeed, then you'll have to make her ill."

Never had his father spoken with such unpromising plainness, and it was impossible to mistake his meaning.

"I'm just about the end of my tether, and if the last door closes against me I'm done," the old man continued. "At my time of life it isn't a pleasant prospect. I hope I can rely on you, Pat?"

"Oh, I think so; I've to get in, and stop in by hook or by crook; number one, isn't it?"

"Number one," assented the lawyer grimly.

"I'm to convince her she's ill, and needing my assistance; if not, to give her a gentle but persuasive dose, administer it myself if need be, number two."

"Number two," assented the old man as before.

"And keep a hawk eye on Miss Alice Harman, try to keep her from getting a too strong hold on old Kate's affections—number three."

"Number three."

"I needn't be too particular about the ways and the means, but it's got to be done, number four."

"Right! You've tumbled to it, Pat, and failing everything else you must make love to the girl—the young one, I mean; even that might be to our advantage, and she's pretty enough to take any man's fancy. I wonder some needy soldier hasn't run off with her before. That sort of thing ought to be in her blood; only she looks as if she were made of sterner stuff than her mother."

Pat looked distinctly blank

"Seems to me a fairly stiff programme."

"It's got to be gone through, Pat, if you don't want to see your old dad in limbo," replied the lawyer equably. "And if you, getting behind the scenes, observe any signs of her wanting to make a new will, or to see any lawyer but me, you must take the last hazard, that's all."

"What's that?" asked the young doctor.

"She must be made incapable of doing it, that's all, I tell you, Pat, we can't afford to stick at anything, not even at the fatal dose, if we're likely to be baulked, and I must say that at the present moment I don't feel very sanguine."

Pat's ruddy colour blanched a little, and he walked to the door and opened it nervously, as if fearing that some one might be listening without.

"It might have the usual ending: guv.," he said unsteadily.

His father shook his head.

"Not if you know your business. Nobody would dispute your verdict, and happily we don't have that confounded and dangerous inquest in Scotland. I hope it won't be necessary to resort to it, do you understand?"

"I say, guv., have you ever got any satisfaction out of the old lady? Have you seen anything she has written in your favour? Talking about knowing one's business and doing it, have you ever managed to get her to make a proper deed, making over the bulk of her property to us?"

Ruthven shook his head.

"You have me there, I admit, Pat, but you know what she is—a perfect skinflint. I've been trying for the last ten years to get her to do that, but I have her word. One Sunday not long ago, when we'd been talking over old times, she got rather more confidential than usual, and assured me that she had a document in the secret drawer of the old desk making me and you right. I tried to get more out of her, and she admitted that we had the most of it. Satisfactory so far, but I'd

like uncommonly well to lay hands on that paper. We've only her word for it, and now anything may happen."

"It might have been managed with a little assistance from Dalglish," said Pat musingly, "before this girl arrived, but now I'm afraid it won't be so easy. We must just go on, I suppose, living in faith. Ten to one she makes another will cutting us out, and giving the jade everything. It would be like our luck."

"It must be prevented, I tell you," said old Ruthven, slightly raising his voice in his passion. "And I rely on you. My disgrace—and it will be disgrace, I tell you—would bring you down too, and we'd have to go forth a sorry pair. I tell you, we must have that money. It's ours by right anyhow. I've been a slave to the old cat for over twenty years, waiting on her caprices and her whims, and it would be awful to be cheated at the last, to see everything go to that haughty young woman."

"It would; I'm with you, gov.;" said Patrick, in a hard, dry voice. "I'll do my best whatever the consequences."

The precious pair shook hands upon it, and drank a whisky and soda, which Pat felt he wanted badly to steady his nerves.

CHAPTER III

BETTER ACQUAINTANCE

AT seven o'clock that evening a meagre dinner was served for two in the big dining-room of Miss Dempster's, which felt as cold as a charnel-house when Alice entered it in response to the gong.

She had not been downstairs from the time of her arrival until then; one of the housemaids, less aggressive than the rest, and pitying her forlorn state, besides being won by her sweet face, had surreptitiously carried her up a cup of tea. She had changed her thick travelling dress for one of black silk, which had been her mother's, and which her clever fingers had altered to fit. It was very plain, with a long train which seemed to give added dignity and grace to her figure. Her face, from which she had managed to wash every trace of tears, was now very pale, but her eyes had lost none of their brightness. There was a rebellious gleam in them, that of a naturally gentle nature roused by imagined wrongs. She found that her aunt had made no change in her toilette except to wrap a shawl of white cashmere about her shoulders before she entered the colder room. The white colour seemed to accentuate the waxen paleness of her face. Alice looked at her with a sort of weird fascination. She looked like a cameo exquisitely cut, and her fine features were thrown into relief by their very sharpness of outline.

The table was carefully laid, and though there were no flowers or other attempt at adornment, the silver

and cut glass were beautiful and valuable family heirlooms, such as are never seen in mushroom households, unless they have been acquired by a collector.

Meikle stood decorously behind his mistress's chair, the steam rose from the massive silver soup tureen on the sideboard.

Alice took her seat on her aunt's right hand, and the dreary meal began. It was fortunately very short. A plate of soup, two small cutlets on a silver chafing dish, and a simple pudding comprised the meal. It was well cooked, however, and Alice enjoyed what she had.

She could have eaten it all without hurting herself, or doing more than satisfy an ordinary healthy, young appetite.

Conversation was practically non-existent. A few further questions about the journey, and Colchester as a place of residence, served to pass the short time that Meikle was in the room. He left immediately when he had placed an immense decanter with a very small portion of wine in it before his mistress. She did not touch it, however, nor offer it to her young guest.

"If you've finished," she said, "we'd better go into the next room. It is cold here."

Alice sprang up, naturally courteous, and opened the communicating door, at the same time offering her arm to guide the feeble steps. Miss Dempster shook her head, though the sternness of her features relaxed somewhat at the unusual attention.

"I can walk," she said, "I am used to it."

Alice smiled slightly, but in the next room she drew the big chair to the fire, which she even dared to stir into a brighter blaze.

"Won't you have a cushion, Aunt Katherine?" she asked, at the same time looking round for one in vain.

The old lady grimly smiled.

"You'll find no such thing, lass, except the pillows in the beds, and I haven't come to that yet. Where did ye learn sic nonsense?"

"My father was long not strong, Aunt Katherine, and I used to wait on him."

At mention of his name the old lady's face hardened again, and she sat down abruptly, pointing her niece to a chair at the opposite side of the hearth.

"Did you find your room to your mind?" she asked.

"No, Aunt Katherine. I hope you will give me another one," the girl answered. "I should not like to be up there beside the servants. I don't mind how small it is, but surely there will be one to spare lower down."

"They are very big on my flat, and are seldom opened," replied the old lady ungraciously. "I am surprised that you complain. I wrote plainly to you, you will mind, saying I expected you to work for your living."

"Yes," said the girl, in a low voice.

"And for that reason I have put away one of the maids. There will be certain duties you will have to perform daily. Dalgleish and I have talked it over; she will tell you."

The girl's face flushed, and her lips set a little hardly.

"I will not take my orders from Mrs. Dalgleish, Aunt Katherine," she said, in a low, clear voice. The words were not so quickly resented as she expected.

"Dalgleish has been here for over twenty years, Alice; she's a good reliable soul. You might do worse than make a friend of her."

There was a moment's silence. While seemingly indifferent, the old lady keenly watched the girl's changing looks, and noted the rebellion in her eyes. And in some strange manner it pleased her to see the high spirit; it reminded her of the long-gone days of her own youth.

"You don't like that, I can see. Perhaps you will tell me what you expected when you came here, or what silly nonsense your father put into your head?"

• "My father put no ideas into my head, Aunt Katherine. He did not expect I should be happy here, but he did not know what else to do with me; to comfort him, because he was heartbroken about what was to become of me after he was gone, I promised to come here, to my mother's old home. I see now it was a mistake."

"Your mother's old home! Captain Harman did not tell you, I suppose, how he broke it up, and sent them that were in it in sorrow to their graves."

• "My mother was happy with him!" cried the girl rebelliously. "He was one of the best of men."

"Faith, then he must have changed, or he was a wily plotter to get round the hearts of silly women. Your own mother said these very words to me the only time I saw her after she ran away with him. Listen, lass, I have never forgotten nor forgiven him for what he did. He stole my sister from me that was the very apple of my eye. It made me an old woman in the summer of my days. Yet you wonder that I do not take you to my heart and set you on the pinnacle you seem to expect. When I gave you leave to come I said, I will punish her for her father's sin, I will make her a servant in the house where her mother was queen."

"But you reckoned without me, Aunt Katherine!" said the girl, rising to her feet. "I will go this very night. I have a few shillings, and I have the address of one who will befriend me, if I need it; I got it to-day from a mere travelling acquaintance, who was kinder to me than you."

• The old lady chuckled and worked her fingers together nervously above the rustling silk of her apron.

"Sit ye down; ye have a proud spirit, but my heart warms to ye. If your eyes could but change to the bonnie brown I might think the years had rolled back. Sit down, lass, and be kind to the old woman, and tell her what you want."

• Some inspiration told the girl that there was a heart

hidden somewhere in that withered basket, and slipping on her knees she looked up into her face.

"It's very little I want, Aunt Katherine, for I have always been poor. But love has taught me to make shift with poverty, and I would try and be kind to you and help you, who have had so little of kindness evidently in this world. Only don't say anything against my darling father, for I worship his memory, and my mother, when she died, died blessing him for all the happiness he had given her. If we can bury all that, we may be helpful one to another, and then perhaps I need not go out to earn my own bread as I must do if I am to be degraded here to a servant's level. You think of me as my mother's daughter. I never forget that I am the daughter of a brave officer, that fought his country's battles with the best of them."

The old lady smiled in a kind of gentle derision, and reaching out her mittened hand, patted the bright young head, with a most unusual touch of demonstrative kindness.

"Lass, ye have the Irish way. Get up, and let's see whether we can come to our bearings. You shall range the house to-morrow, and make your own choice of a room."

At the moment, and without knocking, Dalgleish entered with a little tray on which were two cups of coffee. In her sore anger and amazement at the unusual picture presented to her vision she nearly dropped her burden on the floor. But she only set it down somewhat rudely on the table, and with her nose in the air and a malignant expression on her face stalked out of the room.

That talk cleared the air, | next day, without fuss
or ceremony, Alice Harman | took her rightful place in
her aunt's household.

She found a strange order of things prevailing. Each unit of the household, while apparently subservient to the head, seemed to be a law unto itself.

The poor old lady, scarcely ever out of her chair, and in reality more fit for her bed, could exercise no supervision over what went on. Alice found that the meagre meals served in the dining-room in accordance with her aunt's penurious ideas had no replica downstairs.

She walked warily, however, keeping her eyes open, and saying little, until she made sure first of all of her aunt's friendship and consideration. To win her was her first and strenuous effort.

It was not a difficult task. The lonely old woman, who had wilfully cut herself off from her own kind for so many years and lived the solitary life, brooding over imaginary wrongs, found herself turning with unspeakable yearning to her sister's child. She belonged to an austere race, however, that prided itself on hiding what natural feelings had been bestowed for the purpose of smoothing the passage from the cradle to the grave, and her satisfaction and growing affection did not find expression in words. It could be felt, however, through the house.

Dalglish speedily found her own influence being undermined, and felt that she was no longer her mistress's right hand.

It was not to be expected that she would bear this patiently; nay, she continued to show her hostility towards the interloper as openly as she dared. But to her Alice paid but little heed.

She would have preferred had the woman been friendly, but since she elected to show another side, well, she could continue in it.

Nor did she, as Dalglish firmly believed, traduce her to her aunt. She seldom mentioned her name, and then only when household matters demanded it. So in this manner and in an apparent quiet, which, however, had many smouldering fires, the year wore to its close.

CHAPTER IV .

A MOMENTOUS DAY

"ALICE, bid them get the carriage out," said Miss Dempster, "at two o'clock this afternoon, and you and I will go for a drive."

Alice, at the table, was adding up the books of the weekly expenditure, and knitting her brows over some discrepancy difficult to explain away. She glanced up in surprise, and then at the windows, which seemed to be obscured by a wet mist.

"It is a very bad day, Aunt Katherine," she said gently. "Do you think it would be wise?"

"Yes, I have something to do. Tell them to be here sharp, and bid Dalgleish lay out all my things, my seal-skin cloak, that has not seen the light for two years. Tell her to air them at the dressing-room fire."

Alice sat back, pen in hand and looked anxiously at her aunt.

She was far from well. She had beheld her daily declining since her arrival three weeks before. She looked more like a cameo than ever, and the waxy paleness of her skin was a thing to wonder at. Of late she had had curious and recurring attacks of pain, which left her weak and spent, although Dr. Ruthven was always able to allay them when he came. Alice did not like the symptoms, and sometimes wished she could consult a medical man in whom she could have more confidence. But her aunt seemed pleased. She

always talked and even joked with Ruthven when he called, and that worthy was well pleased with his position in the house, which seemed to have become established and solidified. Following out his father's directions, he was assiduous in his attentions in season and out of season, and had tried to make himself agreeable and to keep a firm hold on the old lady's good graces. And apparently he had succeeded. But he witnessed the growing attachment to her niece, and the girl's corresponding influence over her, with dismay. He could not help admiring Alice Harman, though he had never been able to make the faintest impression on her. She was as cool and proud in her bearing towards him as she had been on the first day they had met, when he left an unfavourable impression on her mind. Indeed, nothing surprised her more than her aunt's apparent good-fellowship with these two men, whom she considered underbred and vulgar and otherwise objectionable.

But regarding them also she had preserved a strict silence, even parrying the question when asked for a direct opinion. But she continued to distrust them. She felt an immense compassion for the old lady, who was quite evidently the prey of a small horde of interested self-seekers. She would not add to the number. She had all a high, proud nature's scorn of such motives, and served her aunt single-heartedly out of genuine compassion at first, and afterwards with a very real affection, which steadily grew. Under that wholesome clean influence the old lady's better self asserted itself, her grumbling, peevish mood visited her less often, and she took a brighter, saner outlook upon life. And there even returned to her a certain quaint and happy humour which had been one of the charms of a long-forgotten youth.

Sometimes the sour Dalgleish, entering suddenly, would find them laughing heartily together; then her curiosity and futile anger knew no bounds. But she

had to keep her place. Alice suffered no spoken or even veiled impertinence in her presence.

Miss Dempster had not been out for more than a fortnight. 'It was now the last week in January, and the weather was grey, dark and bitterly cold.

"Hadn't we better wait until to-morrow morning, Aunt Katherine?" said Alice anxiously. "Perhaps it might be brighter then."

"No," answered the old lady determinedly. "It is to-day I will go. Ring the bell, lass, and give Meikle his orders."

One ring brought Meikle, two gave the signal for the attendance of Dalgleish, who, however, was never very far away: More than once Alice had caught her suspiciously like eavesdropping outside, and had once sharply reprimanded her. But Dalgleish did not care. She had her own ends to serve, and on the few occasions when she had an opportunity to be alone with her mistress did her best to assert her sway.

But, though civilly treated, she found her advice scorned and set aside: her mistress now made her niece the standard of her doings, and consulted her on every possible subject.

Meikle appeared surprised when he received his orders concerning the carriage, albeit he did not permit his feelings to appear.

While not less resentful than his colleague, he could better hide his feelings, and Alice regarded him as harmless, though a poor servant who let many duties slip.

As he pushed open the baize-covered door which led from the hall to the head of the basement stairs, he met Dalgleish full in the face.

"It's the carriage wanted," he said, in an odd voice, "at two o'clock, and lunch half an hour earlier. Are ye gaun doon? Tell the cook, for it's time I was in my pantry."

Dalgleish leaned against the wall and folded her arms.

"The carriage at two; what for on sic a day? It's

that upstart, and she'll kill my mistress. That's what she's after, I tell ye, Meikle. You and me may as well pack our traps and be off. No a penny'll come oor way, let it be long or short."

"Minister Ruthven says it's a' richt," said Meikle, but he looked nervous at these dark words.

"If we could only find out what she wants the carriage for," he added, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

"It's maybe claes. I heard them speakin' wan day, and the mistress said they would hae a day's shoppin'. A day's shoppin', Meikle; ye ken what that means for an upstart like Harman! She'll worm pounds ooten the mistress. Eh, if I could only tell her wance what I think!"

"You'd find yourself ootside the door, my wummin," observed Meikle, in the same gloomy tones. "Ye couldna gang oot, I suppose, and follow the carriage to mak' sure?"

"Rinnin' ahint like, at my time o' life! No, thank ye, Meikle, ye can try that little job yersel'."

Meikle listened with both ears open when he waited on the ladies at lunch, but was unable to obtain the slightest hint regarding their plans for the afternoon. As he was not on good terms with Samuel Chisholm, the coachman, he would not demean himself to ask him for any information. Punctually at two the old family coach, now so seldom used, with its pair of sleek, fat, good-natured looking grey horses and decorous coachman on the box, drew up at the door. Both Meikle and Dalgleish were in attendance, apparently equally solicitous regarding the comfort of their mistress. But it was on her niece's arm she leaned as she descended the broad, shallow steps, lifting her head to the grey sky, as if she felt even that damp, soundless air to be good. A second more and they rumbled off, leaving the Square by the east side, and coming speedily out into the South Bridge. There the horses' heads were turned, however, and in a few minutes' time they were bowling smoothly

along Princes Street towards the west end. At Frederick Street the horses' heads were turned again, and directions given to stop at a certain number.

"I'm going to call here on a friend, Alice, a man of business, and I shall not need you for half an hour," said the old lady as the carriage stopped. "If ye like ye can take a walk back to Princes Street, and there's a pound to spend; maybe ye need some gloves or lace, as a lassie aye needit when I was young."

"But don't you want me to come in with you, or at least see you safely inside?" asked Alice, as she thanked her aunt.

"The man I want to see lives on the ground floor, and he's expecting me," she replied. "I'll take your arm up the steps, and I'll be ready for you in half an hour."

Alice gave the old lady her arm and helped her up the few steps to the door of the high building, once an old family house, but now let off in chambers and offices. But so entirely free was she from curiosity that she did not even read the name on the particular door which opened to receive them, the stopping of the carriage having been noted from the front office window. In the dim light prevailing in the passage she observed that the man who came to the door and received her aunt was comparatively young, tall and pleasant-looking. Beyond that he left no impression on her mind. Girl-like she was pleased to have a walk along the fashionable promenade, which, in spite of the dull day, was thronged.

She was standing before the window of a large mercer's shop contemplating a slight purchase, when some one behind spoke her name. Turning round suddenly she beheld Traquair, whom she had met at the inn at Blenkenfoot, and had several times thought of in the interval, even expecting that he might call, as he had promised to do, in the holidays. He was accompanied by a lady sufficiently like him to leave Alice

in no doubt as to their relationship, even before she was introduced.

"Miss Harman, I'm very fortunate!" he exclaimed, in tones of undisguised satisfaction. "We were talking about you to-day, and wondering how we should discover you, for I was stupid enough not to get a more explicit address from you. This is my sister, Mrs. Marshall King, of whom I told you."

The two women shook hands, mutually attracted one to another. At the moment, with a little flush of excitement on her face, Alice looked her best. Traquair's sister genuinely admired her, and no longer marvelled at her brother's persistent desire to renew their acquaintance.

"I must thank you for your kindness to my boys on that journey," she said kindly. "They have often talked about you, but we had no chance of discovering you, Jack, so like a man, having taken so little pains to make it possible."

"Lucy never loses the chance of a dig at me," said Traquair, with his big, honest smile. "But, now we've found you, we shan't let you go so easily. When will you come and see my sister? I make free of her house; you see, it is my real home, though I live among the wilds at Blenkenfoot."

"I am very much engaged with my aunt; she is so busy most of the time, I can get out very little. Perhaps Mrs. Marshall King would come to me first; any afternoon would do, and the house is at No. 84 George Square."

"Then it's all right?" said Traquair anxiously, "and not so bad as you expected?"

"It was very bad at first, but I am beginning to get on better," replied Alice frankly. "In fact, I am as happy as I could be away from Colchester and my old life."

"I see, I'm glad of it," said Traquair sincerely. "Well, Lucy, when can you go?"

"One day this week, and afterwards we will hope that Miss Harman may be spared to spend an evening with us."

"I should like that," Alice answered, with sparkling eyes, realising for the first time how she had missed congenial and suitable companionship, and how great had been the strain of the past weeks.

"I must go now, I am afraid. I have a little purchase to make and to call for my aunt at the place where she is. Good-bye, I am very pleased to see you."

They shook hands, Traquair perhaps with more fervour than the occasion seemed to demand. His sister looked at him with a whimsical glance.

"Is this the real thing this time, 'Jack'?" she asked, with a note of banter in her voice.

"Looks like it, Lucy. What do you think of her?"

"A beautiful girl. Her eyes seem to haunt one. You know how great I am on presentiments, Jack? Well, I have a presentiment that we are going to be very much mixed up with Miss Harman."

"I don't think much of your presentiments as a general thing, Lucy, but I'll hope this one will come true," he answered. "I feel a little like it myself."

The little episode had pleased and uplifted the girl; and, as she walked back to Frederick Street, her heart felt light indeed.

She found her aunt already in the carriage, looking a little pale and tired, but otherwise pleased.

"I've done my business. He's a clever young man, that, Alice. I knew his mother well. He's very like her. I'm glad it's all settled."

"So am I, auntie," replied the girl, without a thought.

"Ye don't pry, lass, it's what I like about you. Now, there's some that would have wanted to find out what I was doing at a lawyer's office."

"Was it a lawyer's office?"

"Yes, but keep quiet about it; not a word to a soul."

Now, tell Chisholm to open the half of the carriage, and to drive us round by Holyrood and the park. Tell him to go up the Castle Wynd, round by Johnston Terrace, and round the Canongate. It was in Johnston Terrace you were born, lass, and I will show you the very house."

Alice looked doubtfully at her aunt before she gave the order.

"You are sure it will not be too much for you, aunt. Another day, perhaps; now the spring is coming we'll have other outings."

"Only this day is ours, lass; tell Chisholm as I say," she answered, and Alice gave the order without further demur.

They were a full hour making the circuit, and the eagerness with which the old lady pointed out every landmark told how familiar they were to her memory. Alice had never seen her so animated, so full of talk. It was like an awakening from a long sleep. It was almost five when they reached home, and Dr. Ruthven was in the dining-room waiting for them. Time being little object to him, he had been sitting there since half-past three awaiting their return. Perhaps it was a happy coincidence, perhaps not, Miss Dempster had certainly outdone her strength.

When they brought her in and placed her in a chair, she laid her head back with a little sigh, and seemed to faint clean away.

CHAPTER V

AT DAGGERS DRAWN

Alice Harman bent over the bed anxiously, and peered into the pallid face of her aunt, where she lay propped among her pillows.

It was now the third week of her illness, and there was no betterment, nay, it seemed to the girl's practised eye that her strength was ebbing quickly, and that death could not be far away. There was a weird, unearthly beauty in the features which fascinated her, even while it caused her heart to sink with dismay. It was the strangest illness she had ever known or heard of—paroxysms of intense pain, relieved by opiates, which dulled the senses, and left her to all appearances dead to the outer world. So it had run its course, and it seemed now only a question of how long the enfeebled body could stand the strain. If outward appearances told anything it could not be long. Presently her lips moved, and there was a faint stirring of the waxen lids, which lifted momentarily, and with a flickering gleam of intelligence.

"What time is it? How long have I been here?"

"It is four o'clock in the afternoon, Aunt Katherine, and you have been here nearly three weeks," answered the girl tenderly, as she bent over her.

"Who comes here in this room? Your father and mother—are they stopping here?"

The girl started back almost in affright. She had heard that those about to pass the mysterious barrier

which divides time from eternity had visions of those who had gone before.

"They have not been here, auntie," she replied, with a great gentleness. "Only I have been here, and the doctor, and once Dr. Guthrie came up to see you, but you did not know him."

"I thought Lily was here and her bonnie bridegroom," she murmured, and wandered again.

"It is time for you to take your medicine, dear," said Alice, and walking to the table, which stood between the long windows, she took from thence one of the numerous bottles, and carried it to the fast fading light.

It was an afternoon in early January, a bleak day, with a cutting wind blowing up from the sea, making the north side of Edinburgh a place to be shunned by those who feared cold and disliked being caught by a blast at the street corners. The old house in George Square occupied a more sheltered position, but even there the wind crept through the openings, and swept gustily across the trim lawns, between the trees, covering them with the flotsam and jetsam easily gathered and swirled by a high wind from the streets.

The girl's face as she held the bottle to the light was a study. Varying emotions struggled there, but dominant was the one of hesitation and suspicion.

"If I could only be certain that it is as innocent as it looks," she muttered to herself. She stood quite a minute, then poured a few drops into a wine-glass, which she set down. Then crossing to the cupboard in the corner of the room, where she kept a little store of things, she poured a few drops of brandy into a wine-glass, diluted it with water, and came back to the bed. To get the old lady to swallow this was a matter of some difficulty. She was still patiently endeavouring to get it down when there came a light tap at the door. Alice called "Come in!" in a low, clear voice, and the figure of a maid-servant appeared. She was a short, thickly built girl, with a broad, plain face, which received

intelligence from a pair of very fine dark eyes. Also her hair was a glory of beautiful soft plaits, wound shining and smooth round her head, under her neat cap. At sight of her Alice Harman looked pleased.

"It's you, Christina," she said pleasantly. "I thought you had gone out this afternoon?"

"I was gaun," replied Christina, in that loud whisper which is more exasperating to a sick or sensitive ear than the full tones of the voice; "but Meikle, he steps in, and says I canna, for he's gaun oot hissel. Dr. Guthrie's in the dinin'-room, Miss Alice."

Alice looked perplexed or she might have smiled at the glory reflected on the girl's face as she spoke a name both revered and beloved. For that good man had lifted her from the pit of slum life, and to him she owed her present position under a mistress she adored. She was only an under-housemaid, but her duties brought her into constant contact with Miss Alice, who had taken to her, and was perfecting the work the good doctor had begun. Neither of them guessed in what rich coin the slum child was to repay that incomparable service.

"I want to see him, Christina, but I don't want to leave Miss Dempster. Would you stay here till I come back? I'll be as quick as I can, and just explain to him why I can't stay. And if Dr. Ruthven comes, come down for me at once."

Christina nodded comprehendingly.

"And if Mrs. Dalgleish should come in—I suppose she has not gone out with Meikle, Christina?"

"No, she's at her tea, and something tilt, in the kitchen," replied Christina, with a grimace.

"Well, if she comes up, explain to her that Miss Dempster has had her medicine, and is on no account to be disturbed."

At this Christina nodded, and promised to faithfully obey.

"My! she does look bad!" she remarked, as she

advanced on tiptoe to up her post by the bedside.

"She is bad," Alice said, as she gathered up the two glasses preparatory to leaving the room. "And she seems neither to mend nor to get any worse."

Outside she entered a small housemaid's cupboard, washed out the glasses and set them on the shelf, then ran down lightly to the dining-room. The stairs and hall seemed cold and gloomy in the fading light, which fell very subdued from a darkly painted window on the stairs.

All the furnishings were dark and dingy, the carpets worn, no sign of lightness or brightness anywhere. And the girl who had passed so much of her life under the sunny skies of the East shivered, as she had done a hundred times on these stairs, since the day the walls had first shut her in like a prison. Her face lightened as she opened the door and beheld the benevolent face of Dr. Guthrie, beaming upon her from where he stood before the fire, warming his hands at its cheerful glow.

"How are you to-day, Miss Harman; and how is the patient?" he asked, as he shook her warmly by the hand.

"I am quite well, thank you, doctor, but my aunt is just about the same. I am very anxious about her. It seems such a strange illness. Half the time she is unconscious, not suffering, apparently, but she gets neither better nor worse, and she has such a strange waxy look. Just now she tried to speak to me, but she is off again into that strange dozing state which is so alarming. It seems to me that it is impossible she can last like that."

The good doctor stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Ruthven still attending, I suppose?"

Alice inclined her head, and something in her expression arrested the attention of the shrewd, kindly eyes bent upon her so keenly.

"You don't feel full confidence in Dr. Ruthven, per-

haps. Would it not be better to have another opinion?" he suggested. "After all, Ruthven is a young man, and his experience can't be great. Besides, he did not distinguish himself at College. A young friend of mine knew him well as a chronic there. It is hardly meet that a life so important as Miss Dempster's should be entirely, as it were, in his hands."

"That is what I feel, doctor; but what am I to do?" she asked piteously. "The Ruthvens, that is, Dr. Ruthven and his father, seem to have great power here. I am, comparatively speaking, a stranger, and they make me feel it. And my aunt, certainly before she became so ill, seemed to have no lack of confidence in them."

Dr. Guthrie was silent a moment. He had no great opinion of the Ruthvens. The father he regarded as one of the pettifogging lawyers who are not very particular regarding the class of business they undertake, so long as there is money in it. He had had some rather sharp passages with him in the Law Courts over cases connected with his philanthropic work, and had on one occasion at least told him with great plainness what he thought of him. The son he regarded as more fool than knave. But his own acquaintance with Miss Dempster did not justify his interference, and he said so to her niece.

"I happened to call here one day shortly before you came from Colchester, on a begging expedition. I was in straits for some money for some of my poor folks, and having heard of your aunt's wealth I made bold to make an attack on it. She received me not very cordially, and sent me away with the offer of half a sovereign, which I am afraid I rejected. Then she called me back to deliver an envelope, which I did not open till late that night; then I was surprised to find it contain a cheque for a hundred pounds."

Alice Harman smiled, well pleased.

"You surprise me! I have never known her so

generous. But she always speaks highly of you. She would have seen you to-day, even, if she had been able. But I question very much whether she is really as rich as people think. I don't believe it myself, or at least I have never seen any evidence of it here, since I came five weeks ago."

"Ah, but you don't know the miser's habits, Miss Harman. I would not be surprised to hear that she had a large fortune to leave, and I hope that she will remember you have shown her such devotion and received so little return. Before you came she was a forlorn creature, with scarcely a friend in the house."

Alice shook her head.

"They profess devotion to her, Dr. Guthrie, and her serving-woman, Dalgleish, gives me no peace. We are constantly at war. She is jealous of me; I distrust her. Oh, I assure you this house at the present moment is a veritable battlefield, where all the human passions play. And I am very much alone. If it were not for Christina Caldwell I am afraid I should give up altogether."

"Christina has turned out well then?" inquired the doctor, who had been responsible for her introduction to the house.

"She is a treasure, faithful, willing and obliging, and with a fund of bright humour which helps to uplift me when I am feeling more than usually depressed."

"I am indeed pleased to hear such good news of Christina. I thought she looked perfectly happy when she admitted me."

"She is very brave, too. She is an intefloper, like myself, and they are hard on her downstairs. Dalgleish positively hates her, and is always casting slurs upon her character and upbringing. We've had several very sharp passages on the subject of Christina already. The girl will stick to me, I think, and I feel that she is my only friend."

"Your position is certainly trying, but I think that you should suggest to Dr. Ruthven next time he comes

that you would like another opinion for your aunt. It is constantly done in cases far less serious than this seems to be."

"Well, I will, I am expecting him every moment. I have other suspicions which I scarcely dare utter. Oh, Dr. Guthrie, these have been most trying weeks, and my very nature seems to have changed. At Colchester I suffered a lot, but there was always peace there with my dear father. I have never before had to live with disagreeable people, some of whom I think positively wicked. These servants who have been in the house so long, apparent models of devotion and affection, are really all harpies, only hanging on to see what they can get. They all hate each other. Oh, the atmosphere of the house is horrible!"

The doctor looked his infinite compassion.

"My dear, I do feel for you, but remember that you may be called to do a great work here, at least you can keep watch on these unprofitable servants. Just think what the poor old lady's plight would have been now had you not been providentially sent to her aid."

Alice slightly shook her head. At the moment the bell rang, sending sombre echoes through the house.

"The doctor! I shall have to go," she said nervously. "I like to be there during his visits; I never leave her if I can possibly help it, even sleeping in the room."

She opened the door and listened, but, hearing no sound of entrance in the hall, closed it again, thinking she had made a mistake.

CHAPTER VI

SMOULDERING FIRES

CHRISTINA CALDWELL sat down cautiously a little distance from the bed, yet near enough to be able to take full observation thereof.

She had in her childhood been a witness to many strange and rough scenes in the old Cowgate and elsewhere, but nothing awed her as did this still figure lying waxen-hued upon the pillows.

Only devotion to her mistress, in reality if not in name, held her to her post.

In a sense she felt relieved when the door opened to admit Mrs. Dalgleish, own woman to Miss Dempster. Hearing voices in the dining-room as she came down from her tea, Dalgleish had ascertained that Miss Harman was engaged there with a caller, and forthwith ascended the stairs to her mistress's room with more than her usual alacrity.

At sight of Christina she merely jerked her thumb backwards in the direction of the door, indicating that she might retire.

Christina's only answer was a stolid shake of the

She had been bidden sit there by her mistress until she herself should relieve her. Christina owned no allegiance to the woman who had not spoken a kind or helpful word to her since the day she first entered the house.

"Ye can go down," said Dalgleish in a whisper. "I'm here to look after my mistress."

"Mine has bidden me stop here, an' I stop," answered Christina in a loud and unmistakable whisper.

A dark flush of anger overspread the forbidding face of Mrs. Dalgleish, and she looked as if it would have relieved her to smite the girl where she sat, apparently the picture of indifference, twirling her thumbs above her white apron, even perhaps secretly enjoying the little passage at arms with her sworn foe.

"You'll pay for this, you impudent hussy," said Dalgleish hastily. "Whenever my mistress is able to speak I'll have you turned out bag and baggage to the streets, where you ought to be, instead of in a respectable house."

"Maybe and maybe no," answered Christina, with a suggestive glance towards the bed.

"If you knew anything of decent service," pursued Mrs. Dalgleish vindictively, "you would know that respect ought to be paid to me, and if you had had your own interest at heart you would have tried to please me and make me your friend. Her you call your mistress is a nobody, a poor beggar who has pushed herself in here for what she can get."

"If she's like that, she's the mair like the rest o' ye," observed Christina tranquilly, "but it's a lee."

Mrs. Dalgleish shook her fist as near the pert offender's face as she dared, and, disdaining to notice her further, pretended to be busy about the bed smoothing imaginary wrinkles from the coverlet, and shaking up sundry pillows the invalid was not using. But Miss Dempster did not move, nor was there any sign of intelligence or comprehension on her waxen features, though her eyes were not entirely closed.

From the bed, she presently walked towards the medicine table between the windows and inspected each bottle, which bore the label of a chemist's shop in the South Bridge. Then she sauntered to the cupboard, but to her chagrin found it locked.

"What does she keep in there? Nothing good, I could swear," she said, with a kind of hiss in her voice, too enraged even to hide it from one she considered so far beneath her as the under-housemaid. "I'll put Dr. Ruthven on his guard this very evening."

"There's brandy in it for one thing," said Christina guilelessly, "an' it's never safe to let that stand about open, wi' sae mony comin' in an'oot the room."

If Mrs. Dalgleish observed the implication of these suggestive words she made no reply. She was in an impotent rage. The thought that a girl of such low origin and so little standing in the house should openly defy and flout her, instead of being impressed by the position and dignity which at least had once been hers, when she was the trusted and confidential friend of her mistress, was as gall and wormwood to her.

Small wonder that Dalgleish hated Alice Harman, the niece of Miss Dempster. Since she had come "begging," as Dalgleish brutally put it, from England, everything in the house had altered. She had apparently wormed herself into the old lady's good graces, or, to put it more correctly, she had not been slow to assert herself, to take up the position her relationship as the daughter of Miss Dempster's sister warranted. Of Dalgleish and her tribe she took no heed at all. They were simply servants, to do so much work more or less well. It was all so badly done that had Alice had her will she would have cleared them all out. Not for her own glory or comfort, but because her young and honest eyes were clear enough to detect self-seeking and double dealing from attic to basement.

Christina sat still, enjoying herself finely. Relieved of the lonely, eerie feeling of being alone with the motionless figure on the bed, she stood in no further awe. After all, Dalgleish was but a servant like herself, though she had years upon her head. But Christina had been reared in an atmosphere where reverence does

not flourish, moreover the experience of her youth had given her extraordinary clearness of vision.

The slums hold a brief for the sharpening of the wits.

Thus baffled, Mrs. Dalgleish bounced out of the room.

But before she left it she hurled a shot at Christina.

"Look here, you street imp, you're not out of the wood yet, nor out of this house. I'm keeping my eye on you and your precious mistress, and I'll see that you're both paid out for all this. You think you're doing fine, but some folks' eyes are open to your questionable tricks."

Christina, returning to the dumb language of the slums, spread her fingers out in an expressive and unmistakable scorn, and, speechless with rage, Dalgleish went out and banged the door.

The reverberation seemed to disturb the sick woman; she moved once more, and finally opened her eyes wide. Christina held her breath.

Never had she seen such eyes, so unearthly bright, so piercing they seemed powerful to read the very soul. Impelled by their gaze, the unwilling girl felt herself rise from the chair and approach the bed.

"That was Dalgleish went out, I heard her voice," whispered Miss Dempster. "Who are you?"

"I'm Christiny, ma'am, the under-housemaid. I came jist before ye lay doon," answered the girl, and her shrill voice dropped to an almost tender whisper. She had heard many strange tales of the old lady's penurious and miserly habits, of her harsh treatment of those in her employment, but had had no personal experience of them, Miss Dempster having been a complete invalid almost from the day she had entered the house. She had been engaged by Miss Harman on the recommendation of Dr. Guthrie, who had taken her family in hand; she therefore considered herself rather outside the usual jurisdiction of the house.

"Christina, the under-housemaid. I don't remember you. Where's my niece?"

“Doon the stair speakin’ to Dr. Guthrie. Wad ye like a drink o’ water, ma’am?”

Christina felt that she ought to do something, and for the first time in her life the tender womanly instinct to help one in distress was awakened in her heart. She was young, full of life and strength and spirits, to her it seemed a terrible thing to be so wasted and worn, to lie there useless and inert; though she could not have expressed them, these were her thoughts.

Miss Dempster felt the hidden tenderness of the tone and look, and it was as if some tension relaxed.

She looked up eagerly, pathetically into the girl’s face.

“I like you to come in. Tell Miss Alice that when she has to leave me I will have you to stay with me instead of Dalgleish; she must not come in. She is only for well folk. Her very petticoats make a noise.”

These words, delivered haltingly and at long intervals, would not have been pleasant hearing for Mrs. Dalgleish. But, though she had her ear glued to the keyhole outside, and could hear the tones of Christina’s voice, she could only catch a faint echo of Miss Dempster’s.

Driven to desperation, she hastily opened the door and once more stalked in. It was the first time, so far as she knew, that her mistress had been conscious for several days. Miss Harman herself that very morning had mentioned with evident alarm that her continued lapses into unconsciousness greatly troubled her. Now was her chance to assert her authority, and for ever discomfit Christina Caldwell, as she had the right to do, for she had served Miss Dempster faithfully, as she herself would have said, for the last twenty years.

“Oh, ma’am, I’m glad to see you like yourself again,” she said. “Is there anything I can do for you now? You know you can rely on your poor old Dalgleish that has served you so long. It has hurt me, ma’am, more than I can say to be set aside by them that, to say the least of it, are not my betters. The very presses are locked against me.”

"Who locked the press?" asked Miss Dempster, with a fluttering about the lips which might have indicated a smile.

"Miss Harman, and she sets this girl here, this incompetent, idle hussy, to watch over me, Dalgleish, that was a stoop in the house before she was born. It's more than flesh and blood can stand, ma'am, and I beg you to give her the downsetting she needs now, so that she may know her place and try to keep it."

"If Miss Harman locked the press, Dalgleish, you may depend she had a reason for it," was the old lady's unexpected reply. "You can go down; this lassie will stop till Miss Alice comes up again."

For the second time, and more effectually, Dalgleish was set aside, by her own mistress, too, and in the presence of one she so heartily despised.

"It's a poor return for all my faithful service, ma'am," she said stiffly. "And there is nothing left but for me to pack my box and go."

"As you like, Dalgleish, if ye take it that way. Miss Harman will pay ye what is owing. But go now. Ye are a servant for the strong days, not for the weak ones; your very claes mak' a disturbance in the room."

It was the last straw. Once more Dalgleish bounced from the room. Even Christina felt sorry for her, and avoided her look as she passed her. She did not dare to bang the door in her mistress's face, but she retired down to Meikle's pantry, there to unburden her woes.

Then they deplored together the woeful change she, whom they called the interloper, had made in the house, how she had usurped their place and power, wormed herself into Miss Dempster's good graces, and all for her own ends, which were certainly no good.

In the midst of their doleful cogitations the front-door bell rang.

"If that's the doctor," said Dalgleish desperately, "bring him into the breakfast room, Meikle, and tell

him what we think. "He might be able to put a spoke in miss's wheel."

Meikle nodded, and made haste to the door. The voices were still sounding in the dining-room; now was his chance. Meikle was the reverse of Mrs. Dalgleish in appearance. He was a small, wizened man, with a ferret-like face, his livery hanging loosely upon his thin frame, and with the air of perpetual cringing, which indicated a mean-spirited nature. But such are often capable of great pertinacity in obtaining what they desire; also they are past masters in the art of hate.

Meikle was quietly opposed to Alice Harman, and really a more dangerous enemy than Dalgleish, who spoke too much.

"Doctor, would you come to the breakfast room for a minute before you go upstairs?" he said obsequiously as he helped the young man off with his coat. "Mrs. Dalgleish has something to say to you privately, and there's never a chance up the stair."

Ruthven nodded comprehendingly, and there was a lurking satisfaction in his eyes as he permitted Meikle to take off his coat.

Knowing the desperate game that was being played in the house from attic to basement, and much concerned at that very moment regarding his own share in it, he was by no means averse to a little private conversation with Mrs. Dalgleish.

He was in straits, and could not afford to despise any help however humble.

There was a quietly eager look on his face as he entered the little breakfast room, and bade her good-day.

CHAPTER VII

IN COUNCIL

"IT'S about Miss Harman, doctor," said Mrs. Dalgleish sourly. "Mr. Meikle and I have been taking counsel together, and we think that there are things going on in this house you should know."

"Dear me! What are they?" asked the doctor, in a facetious way he sometimes adopted when desirous of hiding his real feelings. "Miss Harman seems very well-meaning, though, I will admit, rather a dour person to deal with."

"Oh, doctor, I believe she's waur than that!" cried Dalgleish, dropping into her mother tongue in the excitement of the moment. "To see my puir dear mistress in her clutches, her clutches!" she repeated, with a shake of her fist, "is mair nor flesh and blood can stand. I said upstairs, the now I would speak to you, and I will."

"Tell me more explicitly what you mean," said Ruthven smoothly, striving to hide his keen interest. The two servants in front of him had no idea what importance he attached to their words nor how they were playing into his unscrupulous hands.

"There's that much to tell I don't know where to begin," said Dalgleish feverishly. "To begin wi', she has put me out of the room altogether, even sleeping there on the sofa at night. I put it to you, doctor, can my mistress be looked after in the night, when she always needs more attention than in the daytime, by a sleeping woman? She says she disna sleep, an' that

when she does she wakens wi' the slightest movement; but she's only flesh and blood like the rest of us, an' I say she should gie the night work up to me, that has been used to wait on Miss Dempster for twenty, ay, nearer thirty, years."

"I will see that this is done," answered the doctor readily. "I will insist in the interests of my patient on Miss Harman giving up the night nursing to you, Mrs. Dalgleish. I don't wonder you feel aggrieved. Well, what else?"

"She's hand in glove wi' that new housemaid, Christina Caldwell, that Dr. Guthrie shoved in here, a lassie off the streets, and no fit to be in ony respectable hoose. If Miss Dempster had been in her sound mind and judgment when it was first spoken o' she wad never hae consented. She's up the stair now sitting by my mistress's bed like ony queen, and defied me when I said that I wad watch when Miss Harman was down the stair. Says she, 'I'm bidden stop here by my mistress, an' I will stop'. I put it to ye, Dr. Ruthven, can there be two mistresses in a hoose ony mair than two heids to a body?"

"That there can't. Miss Harman has certainly taken too much on herself. I'll point out to her the risk of leaving Miss Dempster in the state she is in with no one to look after her but the one you speak of. Well, is there anything more?"

Mrs. Dalgleish looked round rather anxiously, and even walked to the door and opened it to make sure there was no listener outside.

"I'm almost feared to speak, doctor; but she has the press lockit, and she gie's Miss Dempster things ooten that press, things you dinna order. Your medicine stands oot boldly on the little table, but I'm nearly sure she poors it doon the sink in the pantry. I've seen her at it indeed. Noo what is it she has lockit up there? If it's perfectly open and above board, what for is it locked? I've been near thirty years in this hoose. and

the only place Miss Dempster ever keepit lockit was the desk in the library, where she keepit her money. And often she's gien me the key o' that to get what she wanted when she was up the stair ill."

The doctor stroked his chin and shook his head.

"I certainly don't like what you tell me, Mrs. Dalgleish, and in the interests of Miss Dempster we will need to keep our eyes and our ears open, I see. Naturally, Miss Harman is anxious about her own future. Having come from the sordid poverty of a garrison town, she wants to make sure of not being turned out of a good substantial home like this."

Encouraged by the familiar tones of the doctor's voice, Dalgleish took a step nearer, while the wily Meikle craned his neck as if gasping to hear the next words.

"I'm no grudgins that she should get something, but Miss Dempster telt me about seven months ago that her money was all divided, and that them as had served her so faithfully would be rewarded. It was when she was recovering frae the last attack she had in the autumn. But since then she's turned against us a'. She even telt me this very day to leave the room. But surely, Mr. Ruthven, your father, that has her affairs in his hands, will see that justice is done, in spite o' Miss Harman?"

"Well, yov see that's not my department. I am solely here for the purpose of looking after Miss Dempster's bodily welfare. But I have not heard my father mention any change in Miss Dempster's will. I think there is no harm in telling you two faithful souls this, and I assure you I sympathise with you very much."

He spoke smoothly, avoiding their gaze, and a satisfied look instantly overspread their eager faces. Then Dr. Ruthven turned towards the door.

"Well, we'd better go upstairs; Miss Harman is still in the dining-room. We may have a few observations to make before she comes up."

"But that besom, Christina Caldwell, is there, sitting as croose as ye like at the bedside—Miss Harman's paid spy in this hoose, as I'm a living woman!"

"I think between us we may be able to shift Christina," observed the doctor carelessly, and the pair left the room, and ascended the stairs.

They found the girl at her post, and though she rose when the doctor entered she made no attempt to leave the room. Miss Dempster was lying as she had been an hour ago, apparently quite unconscious. The passing gleam of energy had fled.

The doctor, rubbing his hands together in true professional style, nodded to Christina, and walked to the fireplace, where he bent down to warm his hands. When he turned again he took a square look at Christina, and decided that she need not be considered or reckoned with.

He did not immediately bid her leave the room, however; Ruthven never made an enemy even of the most insignificant if he could help it. It was a policy his father had instilled into him at a very early age.

When his hands were supposed to be sufficiently warm, he approached the bed, and, lifting Miss Dempster's inert hand, proceeded with his watch to take her pulse. Then he put it gently down with a very grave face.

"I shall need some hot water, my girl, some very hot water," he said, bending his brows on Christina's face. "Will you be kind enough to go down to the kitchen, and see that it is boiling before you bring it up? It will be no use otherwise."

Christina looked from one to the other undecided. She really dared not disobey an order so reasonable, and tried to comfort herself with the assurance that in the doctor's hands Miss Dempster was perfectly safe. She turned from the room wishing with all her heart, however, that Miss Harman would come up. She even wondered as she flitted past the dining-room door

whether she should summon her; but, reflecting that probably Dr. Ruthven's arrival had already been announced, and that her message might be resented as superfluous, she passed silently down to the basement. In the kitchen she found that the kettles had been emptied for the various teas, and there was nothing for it but to set on cold water with some sticks above the fire, which had died down, and thereafter to vigorously apply the bellows, and wait with what patience she might.

Directly she left the room Dr. Ruthven closed the door, smoothly turned the key in the lock, while Dalgleish, imitating his example, locked the door leading into the dressing-room.

Now, Miss Dempster's bed was one of the old-fashioned four-poster type, with curtains which could be drawn all round so as to shut it off like walls. It stood between the door of the dressing-room and the other door, so that when the curtains were drawn, even partially, it was possible for any one to enter by either door without being observed by the occupant of the bed.

Formerly an old-fashioned cheval-glass had stood between the windows, but it had been removed at the beginning of this illness to make room for a useful table on which to set medicines and other articles necessary to a sickroom. It was Alice Harman who had caused the little change to be made, but in her own interests it had been a grievous mistake.

Having guarded themselves against intrusion, the doctor walked to the cupboard, which was in line with the bedroom door opening upon the landing. He found it firmly locked. All the locks and keys in the old George Square house were of substantial and reliable make, difficult to tamper with.

"I agree with you that this does not look well, Mrs. Dalgleish, and in the interests of our patient I think it will be our duty to have it opened. To-night, when I have succeeded in convincing Miss Harman that it is

her absolute duty to give up the night nursing to you, I will rely upon you to get it open. You can try all the other cupboard keys in the house. Probably they are all moulded on the same pattern."

"I'll see to it, sir; there's plenty keys in the house, and I'll try them all before I'm beat."

"In the interest of our patient a little diplomacy is necessary, Mrs. Dalglish, and nobody will be quicker to thank us than Miss Dempster herself. She has undoubtedly been infatuated by this girl, who has all the cleverness of those accustomed to live by their wits, but perhaps we may be able to circumvent her by quite legitimate means. But you must exercise great discretion, and remember how implicitly I trust you. I expect you to deserve that trust."

"Yes, sir, I'll do my best to keep my mistress out of her clutches, and to serve you," said Dalglish fervently, elated at the near prospect of being able to triumph over her enemy.

"Now we must see what is necessary here," said the doctor, approaching the bed. "She is a long time with the hot water. It shows how right you are in your suspicions, and how slack they are to do anything to really help the old lady. I am astonished myself that a lady of Miss Dempster's capacity should have been so easily taken in; but Miss Harman undoubtedly has a spice of the adventuress in her, and so has been able to cast a kind of spell over her aunt, whose failing powers were specially suitable for the purpose."

"I'm glad you see things in their true light, sir. I believe that Miss Harman's only object is to serve herself, and to get a hold of Miss Dempster's money by hook or by crook."

"She'll be cleverer even than we think her, Mrs. Dalglish, if she succeeds. There is very little, in fact, no chance, of Miss Dempster being any better. She is even now in a state of collapse, and will probably slip away in it through sheer exhaustion. She is not able

to transact any business. Even Miss Harman, clever as she is, would find it difficult to get these poor frail fingers to sign any document. I feel that it is no breach of confidence to assure you that you and Meikle are all right, and your faithful services have not been forgotten."

Mrs. Dalgleish looked relieved.

"But she wasna ill when Miss Harman came, sir, and they even went out a lot together in the carriage, just after Christmas," she said doubtfully.

"Oh, I should not trouble about that. If there had been any change my father would know about it. Well, I'll just give Miss Dempster a dose, and then we had better unlock the door, lest Miss Harman should come up and suspect us in her turn."

He took a small case from his pocket, Dalgleish, paying no particular attention. When the dose was administered, Dalgleish unlocked the doors.

Hardly had she done so when she heard the hall door go, then a light footfall hurrying up the stairs, followed by Miss Harman's entrance to the room.

CHAPTER VIII

CHRISTINA IN THE BACKGROUND

THERE was a quick, eager, questioning look on the face of Alice Harman as she entered the room, and her colour had risen with the exertion of rapidly mounting the stairs. Ruthven cast an involuntary glance of admiration upon her. Certainly she was very fair to look upon.

"Doctor," she said hurriedly, "I did not hear you come in, and no one told me you had arrived. I left Christina here. What has become of her?"

"I had to send her to the kitchen for some hot water, but I think now we shall not need it; Miss Dempster seems much more composed," he answered smoothly. "You can withdraw, Mrs. Dalgleish, and I will try to settle that little matter we spoke of."

Dalgleish said "Thank you, sir," meekly, and withdrew, though much against her will. She did not proceed farther than the dressing-room, however, where she hoped to catch part at least of any conversation which might pass between Miss Harman and the doctor.

"How do you think my aunt looks to-day?" queried Alice anxiously as she stepped towards the bed. "I am more anxious about her than I have ever been; she seems so frightfully spent, and looks so strange. Look at her colour; it is like death."

"I fear it cannot be much longer warded off, Miss Harman," he replied, in decorous tones. "Of course one has to take into consideration her great age."

"What is her age? I have never been able to find it out exactly, though I know she was eighteen years older than my mother."

"Her exact age I could not tell you either. My father is probably the only one who knows," he replied. "Then she has never been strong, and you know how sparsely she has lived. She has never taken the ordinary good of life even, nor sufficient nourishment. Since I have attended her I have been vainly endeavouring to get her to take more nourishment."

"Dr. Ruthven, may I ask who was my aunt's medical attendant before you came?" she asked. "I have understood from your father that it is not so long since you began practice."

"Four years; but I've been dosing her on and off for a good while. She has always liked me," he said, with a slight airiness of tone and manner which Alice particularly disliked. "Who attended her before? Oh, an old fossil who lived in Buccleuch Place, one of the old school, who wore a broad-brimmed hat and a stock, and whose ideas were as antiquated as his looks. He died a couple of years ago. Nobody ever knew his age now, but I should think, judging from appearances, that he could not have been much under a hundred."

Alice looked disappointed. She had had it in her guileless mind to suggest that he might be called in to offer an opinion as having some special knowledge of Miss Dempster's constitution. Ruthven, by no means lacking in perspicacity, immediately took the initiative.

"You would like a second opinion, perhaps, for your aunt?"

"I should indeed," she answered, surprised at his readiness to make the suggestion she had been almost afraid to offer. "Dr. Guthrie has just been here, and he also advised it. Will you bring some one to-morrow morning? It seems to me that no time should be lost with my aunt in such a state."

"Very well, I'll bring a professor to-morrow morning

or to-night if you like; but perhaps we'd better leave it till the morning."

"Oh, to-morrow will do I should think. There is no use disturbing her to-night, and a few hours can't make much difference surely," she said quickly, looking the relief she felt, and even inwardly blaming herself for having harboured unjust suspicions regarding the young man's probity. She disliked him intensely; she did not think him a gentleman; his familiar manner irritated her beyond all telling, and though she had done her best to snub him she had not succeeded. Of the two she certainly preferred the father, who could adjust his manner better to please her, but she was conscious of a sharp distrust of both.

"Now there is another little matter to be spoken of as we are discussing things," said the doctor. "It is about the nursing; I must put my foot down, I am afraid, on present arrangements. It is quite impossible that you can go on both night and day; indeed, in the interest of my patient I am bound to forbid it."

Alice set her lips together, and he saw her whole face harden.

"You will break down yourself sooner or later, probably sooner, and then you will regret your own foolish persistence. What I would suggest is that you would take entire charge of Miss Dempster in the daytime, and leave her to the care of her faithful servant, Dalgleish, at night."

Alice shook her head.

"I don't wish to throw any doubt on Dalgleish's devotion, Dr. Ruthven, but she is not a good nurse. She irritates my aunt at every turn, and her temperance seems to rise when she sees much of her. If help must be got it would be far better to get a professional nurse from the infirmary, which is so near. I think they can be got there?"

The doctor emphatically shook his head.

"Nothing would induce me to agree to that. Will

you excuse me reminding you that I know Miss Dempster's habits and her opinion of things much more intimately than you can possibly do? Professional nurses are one of her pet aversions. If she saw a uniform in the room I would not be answerable for the consequences. And as to Dalgleish having a disturbing effect on her, whether true or not, it would not affect her at night. She will have her sleeping draught as usual at ten o'clock, and probably will require nothing more until the morning. Therefore, I am afraid I must insist on Dalgleish getting her turn at nursing. Besides, the poor old soul feels it keenly. She was weeping about it to me just before you came in. Remember, she had been Miss Dempster's attached attendant for over twenty years. I would not hurt your feelings, Miss Harman, but she has acutely felt the change in Miss Dempster's demeanour since your arrival in the house."

Alice held her peace, biting her lips, farther than ever from being convinced of Dalgleish's single-minded devotion, but feeling that she could not make out a strong case for her suspicions.

"Miss Dempster reposed great confidence in her until quite recently," said Ruthven pointedly, "and, of course, the old soul naturally feels aggrieved. Try to put yourself in her place."

"She has been most unkind to me, unkind and rude, since I came, Dr. Ruthven, but I would not deprive her of her just rights. If you advise it I will leave my aunt's room at night."

"I certainly advise it, in the interest of all parties," he replied, delighted to have gained his point with so little trouble. "I can understand that your position is a difficult one."

"It has been, but what troubles me is that my aunt, though surrounded by those who profess devotion to her, and who have, as you point out, served her so long, had little or no confidence in any of them," Alice observed boldly.

Then she turned away, plainly indicating that she wished the conversation to end.

"Have you any further orders?" she asked coldly. "Do you think there is any chance of her having another paroxysm of pain? It is dreadful to see her like that."

"I have given her something to soothe her meanwhile, and I will come back in the evening. Be prepared for another doctor being with me, I shall certainly bring one if possible. And may I beg you to try and be composed? You seem on the verge of hysterics."

"I?" exclaimed Alice, drawing herself up indignantly. "You are quite mistaken, Dr. Ruthven, I am not at all a hysterical person."

"Even the strongest will give way, and you have put too great a strain on yourself," he warned her. Then he bade her a civil good-afternoon, and went downstairs, where he found Dalglish hovering about between the green baize door and the front hall.

"Did you manage it, sir?" she asked eagerly.

He nodded.

"Oh, yes, nothing easier; she only wants firmly taking in hand like most women," he replied airily. "You're to take the night duty. I'll look in between nine and ten, if not before, to give you full instructions."

Dalglish's dull eye brightened, and, having let the doctor out, she retired to the pantry to acquaint Meikle with the good news.

Meanwhile Christina Caldwell, with her kettle of hot water, now not required, had joined Miss Harman in the sickroom.

"Here's the watter, miss, but where's the doctor? I'm vexed I've been so long, but the fire was doon, an' a' the kettles empty."

"It is of no consequence, Christina, leave it in the dressing-room. I am much obliged."

Struck by the depression in the tone of her beloved mistress, the girl did as she was bid, and then returned to the room, under pretext of seeing to the fire.

"What does the doctor think noo, Miss Alice? Is she any better?"

Alice shook her head.

"I think myself she is worse, Christina, much worse," she replied. "But we are to have another doctor to see her to-night."

"Wha's bringing him?" asked Christina, with extraordinary bluntness.

"Why, Dr. Ruthven, of course."

"Will he be like himsel', miss?"

"What do you mean, Christina?"

"Do you think he's a guid doctor? We had students at the Coogate Mission that were faur cleverer nor him."

"I can't pass any opinion, Christina. The thing we have to remember is that Miss Dempster seemed quite satisfied with him when she was able to speak. She never hinted that she wished to see any one else," said Alice, scarcely knowing whether she ought to reprimand the girl or not. Yet she was so convinced that she only meant well that she could not resent her frank speech. And in that great house she was so forlorn a creature that the comradeship, even of a little servant-maid, was precious to her.

"What is troubling me a good deal more than that, Christina, is that I have to leave my aunt's room at night. The doctor insists on it."

"What for?"

"He says, what is perhaps true, that I cannot go on both night and day, that unless she is watched by one who has all her faculties about her she may go off at any moment. But you don't know how I hate leaving her. I feel somehow that if she could speak, poor dear, she would not like it."

"And wha sits up?" asked Christina laconically.

"Dalgleish."

"Imphm!" observed Christina, as she lifted the empty coal-scuttle. "When are you coming to your tea, miss? Will I bring it up here?"

"If you please. Put it in the dressing-room. I am so glad we have that inner room; it is such a convenience."

"Ay, it is," assented Christina, as she retired. Having carefully closed the door, she paused in the narrow passage leading from the dressing-room door to the wide landing at the head of the stairs.

"Imphm!" she repeated, in a long-drawn breath. "Hot water! they never want it. It was to get rid o' you, Teen. But there'll be twa sitting up the nicht, Da'gleish, my wummin, an' the ither yin'll be Teen, though ye'll no see her."

CHAPTER IX

THE PROFESSOR

AS Ruthven left the house five o'clock was ringing from the steeple of the Tron Kirk. Reflecting that he would probably catch his father before he left his office for the day, he proceeded along George IV. Bridge to the Mound.

It was a beautiful clear afternoon with a touch of frost in the air, and all the spires and roofs stood out against the crystal sky with startling beauty. It was a day on which Edinburgh looked its best. From his high coign of vantage, Ruthven had an uninterrupted view of the incomparable panorama spread before his vision.

The city descended steeply to the green plains, skirt-ing the shores of the Firth, on which the lingering sunset glow seemed to make a blood-red pathway. He could see the whole fringe of the Fife shores, the pellucid atmosphere making it possible even to discern the houses on the other side. The river seemed to have narrowed strangely; involuntarily certain words he had learned long ago at his mother's knee rose up before him, and he hummed them to a familiar tune.

Life, like a narrow sea, divides
That happy land from ours.

Then suddenly aware that it was a hymn he sang, he drew himself up sharp. "Mooning, Pat, and so ticklish a job in hand," he

THE PROFESSOR

muttered, and quickening his steps he began to make a quick descent to the valley below. A few minutes' brisk walking brought him to St. Andrew Street, in which his father's office was situated. He still clung to a respectable and dignified locality, but had been obliged to leave the more professional ground floor, and remove his habitation two stairs up. He had roomy, comfortable quarters there, however, and the largest room of the house he had taken for his office, dividing it up for privacy from his solitary clerk by a partition of obscured glass.

Once Patrick Ruthven, the elder, had been a member of a respectable and respected firm in the city, but he was now shunned by most of his professional brethren, because he had been mixed up in so many shady cases.

The general opinion of him in legal circles was that he only escaped just punishment by the skin of his teeth, and that he owed it to his extraordinary slipperiness of speech and cleverness at evading consequences. But he had now no professional standing, and the little business that came to him was mostly of a kind likely to be refused by better men.

The career of Patrick Ruthven, the elder, would in itself make no mean story, especially if the records of his numerous dupes could be obtained.

But he had made very little of it after all. Nearing the allotted span, he found himself not only outside the pale in legal circles, but often in sore straits for money, even the wherewithal to live. Yet he had reduced that living to the simplest problem. He occupied the rest of the flat entirely alone, took his meals, when he had money, outside, and allowed a woman to come once a week to clean the place. It was a wretched, sordid existence, of which none could be more heartily sick than himself. The old lady in George Square was now his only client; small wonder that he clung to her like a limpet to a rock. Pat had been educated for the medical profession solely to strengthen their position

where she was concerned, and now the fruition of their cherished hopes seemed very near.

He jumped up to greet his son with some apprehension in his looks.

Although Pat had of late benefited considerably by his father's constantly applied advice, and had made strides in realising the importance of every trifle, old Ruthven often wished he could have united both medical and legal duties in his own person.

It was a desperate game they were playing, and the slightest false move might undo all the laborious plotting of years.

"Well," he said anxiously, "what's up?"

Pat jerked his head in the direction of the glass partition. His father hastened to assure him that they were the only occupants of the office.

"Briggs has a holiday; gone to bury his aunt," he replied flippantly. "Anything up? You look glum."

"I'm stumped. She wants somebody else to see old Kate."

"Who does; Miss Harman?"

Patrick nodded.

"What did you say?"

"Said that I'd bring a professor, of course. How can we get out of it decently? Can you suggest a way?"

The old lawyer, with his clean, close-shaven face and shifty grey eyes, slightly perplexed, pondered a moment.

"You can't get out of it; you'll need to take somebody. That's a dead certainty. And it will be to our advantage."

"If it doesn't finish us at the off-set," observed Patrick reflectively. "If it has to be done, I'd better clear out."

"You seriously think it would be all up?"

"I know it. There's symptoms nobody could explain away."

"But it's got to be done all the same."

"Explain yourself, guv.," said the young man im-

patiently. "Of course I know you'd find a way somehow out of most things, but I confess I don't see what you can do here."

"You must get somebody to act the part."

Patrick shook his head.

"You don't know what you're talking about, guv. Excuse me, but that's the fact. And she's as sharp as a needle. She'd see through a stone wall if there was anything on the other side she wanted to see."

"You think she's a trifle uneasy?"

"That doesn't express it. She suspects the whole gang, and if the old lady doesn't peg out pretty soon there'll be a nice mess. She'll kick over the traces altogether—Miss Harman, I mean—and have the whole College of Surgeons in to see her. She's capable of anything, and I see her gradually getting worked up to it."

"I see. Then something's got to be done without delay. How about the rest?"

"Oh, Dalgleish and old Meikle are fair and square. They know what side their bread's going to be buttered on, and they only see what is discreet. Of course, I'm the model of discretion where they are concerned, and they think everything's above board. But how about this second opinion? Can you suggest anything?"

"Yes, there's Gardiner. Why not Gardiner?"

"Gardiner? What Gardiner? Do you mean old Woolly, as we called him? If he comes in, then it is indeed all up. He has an eye like a hawk, and, besides, he has the bad taste to hate me. Never gave me a decent chance in the orals or anywhere. No, no, guv., Woolly is out of the count."

"Idiot; I don't mean him; I mean old Dicky Gardiner, that used to live in Rankeillour Street. I saw him the other day as shabby as he could well be. He'd be glad enough of the job, and a little judicious coaching would put him quite up to it. He's a very respectable-looking specimen. I could lend him my overcoat. Old Dick's your cue."

Patrick Ruthven stared in momentary bewilderment. The man of whom his father spoke was a broken-down practitioner, whom drink had brought nearly to the verge of ruin. But once he had had a good practice, and had been well liked by a large clientele of the better class.

"It's playing the game a bit low down, isn't it, dad?" he asked, with a very doubtful note in his voice.

"That may be, but we're in desperate straits; at least you are," was the significant retort. "You know, or ought to know, the consequence of bringing in any expert opinion at the present juncture. Yet, if you refuse to have another opinion, you naturally raise suspicion in the girl's mind. You're between two fires. Of two evils I advise you to choose Dicky. A word in season and a judicious dram afterwards will do all that is needful with him. And you had better not lose any time. I'll come out with you now, and wait at your place till you've seen Dicky and reported on him. Then he can come along and get my greatcoat."

Ruthven was compelled to admiration for the simple, direct way in which his father disposed of every detail.

"You're great, guv.," he said slowly, "positively great! Dicky is certainly an inspiration. If he's sober enough to play the part it'll be all right, but it will be better for us if he has just a little in."

"Well, if he hasn't we can supply it when you bring him to your house. We'd better go. There'll be no more business done to-day anyhow; it's just on six o'clock."

They left the house together, and walked the way Patrick had come, talking disjointedly regarding the probable issues of the next few weeks.

They were united in railing against the irony of fate that had brought Alice Harman to Edinburgh at such a critical moment, but they were determined that she should not stand in their way. The elder Ruthven, who had long since parted with every conscientious scruple, was now a person of one idea—to possess him-

self of the greater part of Miss Dempster's wealth. He had several years before carefully prepared a will for her, and had then urged upon her the necessity and wisdom of providing adequately for such of her servants as had served her well. This was part of his own clever policy. He had also recommended certain city charities to her consideration, and had been content with the residue to be left to his son Patrick.

He had even spoken to her, since Miss Harman's arrival, of the advisability of adding a codicil, which would include her among the list of beneficiaries, but Miss Dempster had not apparently taken kindly to the idea. Ruthven, therefore, was virtuously prepared to defend himself when the death of the old lady should occur, and his motives and actions be criticised. He had not the faintest idea that all his plans had been frustrated by Miss Dempster herself, acting on her own initiative, and without even the knowledge of Alice Harman. If he had known of that half-hour's visit paid to a certain office in Frederick Street he would have had many uneasy moments.

About nine o'clock that evening a cab drove up to the door of Miss Dempster's house, and Dr. Ruthven alighted, accompanied by a tall, spare, intellectual-looking elderly gentleman, whom he ushered with some ceremony into the dining-room.

"Tell Miss Harman I am here with Professor Gardiner, Meikle," he said ostentatiously. "And ask her whether it will be convenient for us to come up now."

Meikle disappeared, and in a very few minutes Alice herself entered the room. She bade them both a somewhat curt good-evening, but was apparently relieved and prepossessed by the appearance of the professor whom Ruthven had brought. He had been in his day one of the handsomest men in Edinburgh, and had been beloved and esteemed by all who knew him. But his fatal craving had entirely ruined a promising career,

and now he was a broken-down wreck who lived, none knew how, earning a few miserable shillings from the very poorest in the squalid part of the city to which he had sunk. But the remnants of his old professional dignity and fine manners remained, or at least seemed to come back to him when emergency rose. He bowed to Alice with a courtly grace.

Clean-shaven, except for his scanty grey whiskers, he had a benevolent look which pleased her. The Ruthvens had managed between them to make him entirely presentable, so far as his wardrobe was concerned, and he looked well pleased with himself. Time was when he had been a familiar and welcome visitor in many such mansions, and there was a pathetic return of the dignity which had once been his. Ruthven introduced him casually, and at the same time remarked that as Dr. Gardiner's time was valuable they had better go up without delay.

Alice nodded and led the way. She remained in the dressing-room while the examination was supposed to be made, and she could hear the low tones of their voices, apparently in earnest conversation.

In about twenty minutes Ruthven opened the communicating door and beckoned her in. Then he glanced towards Gardiner, indicating that he had better deliver himself of an opinion.

"There is nothing for me to do, dear lady, but to confirm Dr. Ruthven's diagnosis and treatment. The patient is in a most critical state. The end may be expected at almost any moment. There is no organic disease. It is simply a case of natural decay. She has lived a long and healthy life, and all her organs are sound."

"How do you account for these paroxysms of pain she has?" asked Alice quickly. "She had a very severe one this evening not long after Dr. Ruthven left."

"Nerve spasms, Miss Harman. The dose of opiate must be increased for her comfort and yours," he said.

smoothly. "You may safely leave all these details in the hands of her doctor, who is one of the cleverest of our younger men."

"Oh, professor, that is too much kindness to an old pupil," said Ruthven quickly, mortally afraid lest in the novelty of the situation the sham professor should say too much. "We are certainly obliged to you for coming this evening."

"I certainly am," said Alice sincerely, and bidding them good-night they went downstairs.

"I will see Professor Gardiner to his carriage and come back and settle Miss Dempster for the night," said Ruthven. "We have a little discussion to make over the case."

Alice nodded, and when the door closed she approached the bed. Her aunt was now wide awake and her lips moving.

"Who was that?" she asked clearly, and with a perfectly intelligent look in her eyes.

"Professor Gardiner. Dr. Ruthven brought him as a consultant to see whether anything more could be done," answered the girl tenderly.

"Gardiner, David Gardiner; ay, I mind him weel. He's very much changed. Get a cup of my own good tea, Alice, and don't let them give me any more drugs. I see more than they think."

There was a pathetic, almost an imploring note in her voice which struck painfully on the girl's ears.

"Dear auntie, what am I to do? If you don't have them perhaps you will suffer more pain, and how could I bear that?"

She laid her hand tenderly on the poor, frail fingers lying so waxen white above the coverlet. They gave a feeble pressure in return, and two large tears rolled from under the tired lids down the wasted cheeks.

"Bless you, bairn! If God had but had pity on my hard heart, and sent you to me years ago there might have been a chance."

After a moment's pause she spoke again, and it seemed to Alice as if her thoughts were wandering once more.

"In the desk behind the pigeon-hole," she murmured. "Tell Patrick Ruthven, my cousin, he'll get what he wants, but it'll not be all he expects. You can gie him the keys. He's been seekin' them a long time. Everything that's there is his, to do with what he likes."

Her voice died away, and her last gleam of consciousness passed.

The little scene and the unexpected words of appreciation of herself were destined to return in memory to the girl, with many a comforting touch, in the dark and terrible days to come.

CHAPTER X

SOME PLAIN SPEECH

THERE was a satisfied look on Ruthven's face when he returned to the sickroom. The ordeal had passed over much better than he had dared to expect. Gardiner had risen to the occasion, and behaved in a manner which left nothing to be desired. For services rendered Ruthven had cheerfully paid him a guinea, and instructed him to say nothing about what had happened. This Gardiner faithfully promised.

One little incident, nevertheless, had escaped Ruthven's observation. If he had noticed it, however, it would not have caused him any concern. As they passed down the stairs from Miss Dempster's room they encountered Christina Caldwell, on her way up to her evening duties in the bedroom. Ruthven did not even glance at her, she was a creature beneath his notice. As she stood aside to permit them to pass she looked, not at him, but at his companion. And a curious tremor might have been observed upon her face.

She had seen the gentleman before, and remembered where she had seen him. Now, Christina had been found by Dr. Guthrie in one of the narrow alleys in the vicinity of the Pleasance.

In Rankeillour Street, near by, Dr. Gardiner had the use of a ground floor sitting-room as a consulting-room for such business as now came his way. Occasionally there was a good deal, but it was by no means remunerative; unless paid on the spot the money was seldom

forthcoming. He was well liked by the poor people, however, and the matrons of the Pleasance pronounced him to be "skilly" in matters wherein they were particularly interested. That he was seldom sober did not trouble them very much, it was a condition to which they were well inured in their own men folk. Custom can rob even danger of its terror.

Now Christina, during the period of her slum-life, had become familiar with the appearance of Dr. Gardiner. He was too striking a figure to be easily forgotten. She, however, made no sign, but passed up to her work, storing this particular coincidence in her mind for future cogitation, if not elucidation. If ignorant, in the ordinary educational sense, she was extraordinarily sharp; the life of the slums having developed in her a kind of sixth sense which enabled her to jump to conclusions nearly always correct. Without confidence in Dr. Ruthven, she believed that the strange apparition of Dr. Gardiner in the house of her mistress was part of some concerted plan of the Ruthvens. But she said nothing, only bided her time.

Having sundry little services to perform in the sick-room, she had the opportunity of observing that Miss Alice seemed more relieved. The tense look had left her face, and though still pale and sad, she seemed, on the whole, happier.

"What did the professor say?" she asked, in a low, quiet voice, as Miss Alice looked kindly at her.

"Nothing much, Christina; I liked him very much, but he offers no hope. His opinion is precisely that of Dr. Ruthven."

"Imphm!" said Christina involuntarily.

"She had been frequently reprov'd by Miss Alice for using this monosyllable in reply to remarks, and even now her kind teacher remembered to hold up a warning finger." Christina faintly smiled.

"Beg parding, Miss Alice," she said, as she bent down to brush up the hearth. "You're gaun to your

bed, aren't ye? I've lichtit your fire, and there's a tray wi' the tea things for fear ye dinna sleep."

Alice's eyes filled at this evidence of faithful and kind consideration. In that great and hostile house she had at least one true friend, who, though despised and rejected by the rest of the household, could be depended on.

"You are a little brick, Christina," she said, and the hearty praise caused Christina's eyes to glow. Presently the doctor entered, and she hastily retired. He had not very much to say, it relieved him also to see that Miss Harman seemed satisfied with what had been done, and he inwardly congratulated himself on his cleverness. For, though his father had suggested the idea, upon him had depended the ultimate success of a risky experiment. That it had succeeded so well filled him with lively hope for the future.

"I will see Dalgleish as I go down, and give her final instructions for the night. You will retire soon, I hope," he added, with a sudden appearance of kindness. "You look ghastly," even Professor Gardiner remarked upon it, and said I ought to insist on your having a rest. 'Easy to insist, professor,' said I, 'but who is to persuade a wilful woman?'"

"I am going to my room almost immediately," Alice replied, with that cold manner which she seemed to assume involuntarily, when he ventured on an intimate remark of any kind.

"I am glad of it." There is so little that can be done; but yet, as the professor says, it may still be a matter of weeks. One never can tell, and you would wish to be able to go through to the end, would you not?"

"Oh, yes, certainly, I shall be able. I am very strong," she replied.

"You will not be disturbed if you should hear the bell go in the night," he turned to say at the door. "I may possibly look back between twelve and one. There is often a sort of crisis then. But Dalgleish will let me in; I will tell her when to expect me."

Alice nodded.

"If there should be any crisis or change, you will not fail to rouse me?" she said quickly.

"Most certainly, you may trust me," he replied earnestly, and Alice was obliged to be satisfied with the assurance; but she was inwardly rebellious, and even yet felt like defying them all, and remaining at her post.

The doctor descended the stairs, and as usual found the assiduous Mrs. Dalgleish waiting for him.

He beckoned her into the library and closed the door.

"Well, everything is arranged satisfactorily, I think," he said, rubbing his hands together. "Miss Harman at last seems satisfied that some of us at least are trying to do our duty. She was favourably impressed by Professor Gardiner."

"What did he say about my mistress?" asked Dalgleish eagerly.

"Nothing that I could not have told you. The old lady is dying; it is only a question of days, maybe hours. Miss Harman is going to bed now. Are you nearly ready to take her place?"

"I am quite ready, doctor."

"I see; well, there isn't much to do, only to give her her medicine at the correct moment. It is explicitly stated on the bottle. Perhaps I will look back about twelve or one. She seems a little worse, and we must be attentive in order to give Miss Harman no chance to say otherwise."

"Certainly, she's one o' them that thinks naebody can do anything but hersel'. She wad say that to me even, that has been my mistress's right hand afore she was born."

"Have you indeed been so long as that, Dalgleish? Certainly I remember you here since I was a little chap. I don't wonder you feel you have a grievance. Now, there's one little thing I want you, to do for me to-night, after you get the place to yourself."

"Yes, sir."

"It's a duty that ought to be done in the interests of our patient, and there is no one except you to do it," with a touch of flattery which mightily pleased Dalgleish.

"I'll do it, you may be sure, sir, if it can be done."

"I thought as much. Well, don't you think, Mrs. Dalgleish, that it is our duty to find out why Miss Harman keeps that cupboard locked, and what she keeps in it? Is it a cupboard that was in the habit of being locked in Miss Dempster's lifetime?"

"No, never; there was naething in it in my time except a few bottles that my mistress never used."

"Perhaps you could find a key to fit it," he suggested persuasively. "Understand, I want no forcing of the lock or anything that would rouse Miss Harman's suspicions or indignation. It is only in the interest of our patient we wish to know. I may tell you there are symptoms in Miss Dempster which I am puzzled to account for, and which I mean to sift." His tone was quite deliberate and suggestive enough.

• An eager light leaped into the eyes of Mrs. Dalgleish.

"I'll find her out if it's possible. I've had my doots a' the time, doctor, but it wasna' for me to say."

"Understand that I accuse Miss Harman of nothing, nor do I even suspect her of underhand dealing. What I do suspect and believe is that she does not administer my medicine to Miss Dempster according to my directions, but either lessens the doses, or omits them, or substitutes something else."

"If she does that, which I am nearly certain of myself, could she no' be punished, doctor?"

"She ought to be; it is not only culpable but criminal, and many persons have had to answer to the law for less," he answered. "Of course, I am talking with great freedom to you, Mrs. Dalgleish, and relying implicitly on your ability to hold your tongue. I have felt for some time—indeed, since Miss Harman's arrival—that I need an ally in the house. Miss Harman, of

course, has her own ends to serve; we can readily understand that she cannot be supposed to share our disinterested devotion to Miss Dempster. How could an acquaintance of a few weeks be expected to feel like the friends of years?"

"Oh, sir, ye put into words every single feeling I've had since ever Miss Harman came," cried Dalgleish, in an unusual burst of frankness. "I'm glad you've spoken; I'll keep quiet and watch like a cat watches a mouse. She'll be clever if she puts anything past me."

"That's right; I thought you'd understand. You can see now at what a disadvantage I am placed, and how little chance I have in treating the case. She pretends to some medical knowledge, having had a lot to do with invalids; and those who know a little, or rather imagine they do, are the very worst to deal with."

"She has a high and mighty way wi' her," observed Dalgleish viciously. "But she'll maybe find we're a match for her."

"If we haven't started the campaign too late, Dalgleish," observed the doctor. "Well, I'll be going; you understand, then, that when you've settled the old lady for the night, and feel yourself quite safe, you set about getting that cupboard open."

"Yes, sir; there's anither press like it in the spare room. I can'try the key o' that, and there's plenty ither keys; it'll be queer if I dinna get into the inside before the morn."

The doctor nodded and went his way. Having closed the door behind him, and instructed Meikle that he need not put in all the bolts and bars, as the doctor was coming back, Mrs. Dalgleish proceeded upstairs.

Miss Dempster was asleep; her niece was standing by the fireplace with her arm on the mantelpiece, looking down into the red heart of the fire.

She stood up at the opening of the door and Dalgleish approached, holding out two letters.

"They came by the nine o'clock post," she said ungraciously.

"You might at least bring them on a salver," Alice replied, as ungraciously.

She was amazed at her own fierce dislike of the woman, and her reluctance to leave her aunt in her charge. It was no use to tell herself how unreasonable it was, since she had been practically in care of Dalglish for over twenty years. The distrust was there, too strong to be crushed or put aside.

"You will call me if necessary?" she said a trifle haughtily as she prepared to leave the room.

"Yes, miss, of course," replied Dalglish decorously; "an' the doctor's comin' back; I'll surely do what he bids me."

"Very well. Good-night."

"Good night, miss."

As the door closed, Dalglish in a sudden fit of impotent fury shook her fist in the direction of the retreating figure.

So the lone night-watch began.

CHAPTER XI

BY THE INDIAN MAIL.

Alice Harman now occupied a room on the same floor with her aunt, though separated from her by the broad landing and the half of a narrow passage leading off. It had been one of the spare rooms of the house, and Alice had chosen it because it had a fine open outlook to the Meadow Walk, where in the early morning especially she could almost imagine herself once more among the green lanes of Essex.

It was full of furniture of the old-fashioned, substantial, mahogany type, and had a huge four-post bed which Alice had managed to relieve with some hangings of white dimity, and had spread about the room the few treasures she had brought from the garrison town associated with the happiest part of her life. On the mantel-shelf stood a large photograph of her father in his uniform, set in a handsome silver frame; it had been a regimental gift, presented to her the day before she left Colchester, and was now absolutely the most precious of her possessions. Above it, in a narrow gilt slip, hung a somewhat faded water-colour drawing of her mother, whom she scarcely remembered in life. That portrait, however, had been familiar to her from childhood; it had accompanied them through all their wanderings, and had always occupied a prominent and honoured place among her father's scanty belongings. It was the portrait of a young girl, little more

than Alice's own age, a beautiful rosy-cheeked creature with innocent round eyes, and fair ringlets lying on her brow. It always seemed to Alice quite a fancy portrait, though her father had often assured her that it exactly represented her mother as he had seen her first at a regimental ball in Edinburgh. Alice preferred the virile life-like figure in uniform, "handsome Dick Harman," as he had been called everywhere; he was indeed a father of whom any girl could be proud. As she opened the door the ruddy glow from the cheerful fire fell full upon the portrait, giving it such a life-like look that involuntarily she started back. Then she smiled a little sadly, and turned up the light.

The room was temptingly comfortable; Christina had forgotten no detail. An easy-chair had been drawn close to the fire, and a little table imported from somewhere else stood beside it, with a tray daintily spread. A shining copper kettle sang on a hob which the girl had hunted up out of the cook's own domain, and cleaned for the occasion. A sudden rush of gratitude to the kind heart that had so planned for her comfort made the girl's eyes grow dim, and she realised as she sank into the chair how utterly exhausted she was. She had not properly undressed for ten days or more, and had only snatched broken half-hours of sleep on a sofa in the sickroom. The rest was grateful to her. Relieved of the tension which had held her so long, she closed her eyes a moment in sheer abandon. Then she suddenly remembered her letters. Both bore the Colchester postmark, though one had been re-addressed from the Indian mail. She recognised the stiff envelope with a familiar crest as coming from the wife of Colonel O'Brien, who had been her father's most intimate friend in Colchester.

She had been very fond of Mrs. O'Brien, a typical outspoken Irish lady of the old school, and she opened her letter first, though the other might have been supposed to interest her the more, since it came from her lover, the man whom she had expected to marry.

"THE BUNGALOW, NORTH ROAD, COLCHESTER.

"MY DEAR GIRL,—I was very glad to get your letter. It was so long coming that I said to the Colonel I'd take a journey to Edinburgh to see whether you had actually reached your destination. I am glad things are turning out better than you expected, and I see that it was wise for you to wait a week or two before writing, or you would have had us all miserable here thinking about you. I foresee that you are going to wind yourself round the old woman's heart in Edinburgh, just as you did at Colchester. Never had a girl such a way. We are all missing you more than we can say. The Colonel is quite down. He says Colchester isn't the same place without you and your father, and indeed I'm not saying but that he's right.

"But I always try to be cheerful: there isn't any use being anything else as long as circumstances will permit. All the friends you care about are quite well, and we often speak about you, and hope you'll come back to us one of these days soon."

"There isn't any news, except that they say Kitty Podmin is engaged to Teddy Fitzgerald. I was calling on Eliza Fitzgerald yesterday, however, and she didn't say a word about it. She was too full of something else. My dear, I'm sending on a letter that has come for you from Jim Stanley, and though I'm not a curious or prying person, I never was more tempted to tamper with what doesn't belong to me. Whatever is in it, I've pondered everything in my mind, and I think I ought to tell you what Mrs. Fitzgerald said. You know I've never been very easy in my mind about Captain Stanley since that minx, Cecilia Travers, went out to Simla in the autumn. And now Mrs. Fitzgerald has had a letter from her, and she told me she and Jim are looked upon as engaged out there, and that Cecilia quite expects to stop out. Now, my dear, I listened to all the woman's talk without passing a single remark, which you ought to set down to my credit hereafter. There can be no

doubt that she told me the gossip of Simla for the express purpose of getting me to pass it on to you. She asked me a great many questions. I told her a few lies as she deserved, for she's a wicked and uncharitable woman if ever there was one, and your poor father couldn't stand her. My husband is just as angry, and has prohibited me to go near her. But I went to hear if there was any news from India, because you told me how irregular Jim's letters had been coming of late.

"Well, dear, whatever Captain Stanley may tell you in his letters, I think you ought to know about Cecilia. That's the kind of girl you are: you always like to face the guns. It's why the Colonel admires you so much.

"I know you'll write and let me know just as much as you like me to know, and you may be sure that whatever happens the Colonel and I will never fail you, and there'll be a corner for you in the Bungalow as long as it shelters your affectionate

"HARRIET O'BRIEN."

"Alice put down the letter still in no haste to open the other one. Then the steam from the kettle arrested her attention, and she made her tea. She was surprised at her own coolness, for she knew perfectly well what were the contents of the Indian letter before she opened it. Mrs. O'Brien's letter had only confirmed a suspicion that had almost become a certainty in her own mind. She drank her tea, ate a morsel of the bread and butter from the plate, and then broke open the envelope, which was stamped with the familiar regimental seal. These were the contents of the Indian mail:—

"RAJHPUTAM, NORTHERN PROVINCES.

"MY DEAR ALICE,—I received your last letter, how long ago I am ashamed to say. I ought to ask your forgiveness, and if I were the usual sort of sneak I could easily furbish up decent enough excuses for my carelessness. But I'm a straight chap; and, besides, I—

knew very well that you'd see through excuses. Your eyes have always been very sharp. I daresay you have noticed a difference in my letters; indeed, you hint at it in yours. I've tried all through the last six months not to show that I have altered a little, but I couldn't help it. Whatever my faults, I'm not a hypocrite. So this brings me to the main object of my writing, which is to tell you that I think we've both made a mistake, Alice, and it's a good thing we find it out before it's too late.

"Before I left Colchester last time, I was beginning to fear it. You see, you're not exactly my style of woman. You are too exacting in your standard of conduct, and, though I have tried my level best to live up to your idea of what I ought to be, I couldn't. You don't allow a fellow enough rope. You see, dear, he may need a little liberty without being wholly bad.

"Then the question of the eternal roof has troubled me a lot. It's beastly expensive out here, and our corps has never been conspicuous for its economy. What a chap has to spend on polo alone would make you open your eyes. I'm not one to bring a girl down to poverty; and, goodness knows, you've had enough of it in your time; you ought to marry a rich man, who would keep you in the lap of luxury. I sincerely hope you will. There's one out here I needn't name who would jump at the chance."

"I'm not vain enough to imagine that you'll wear the willow long for my sake. It would be a pity if you did. I was never half good enough for you, that's my only consolation in writing this letter. It's not a nice letter to have to write, but I'm determined to act upon the square. I assure you it has kept me awake at nights ever so long thinking what I could say to you. I console myself with thinking you never cared as much for me as I did for you. You know I often complained of your coldness. I hope Captain Hafman is better. I hear he has had a long spell of bad health just now.

Of course, he'll be very angry, but perhaps you'll be able to talk him over. Will you write me a line some day telling me you forgive me? I'm sure our marriage would have been a ghastly mistake. Try to believe in the sincerity of my intentions, and not to think of me too hardly. I do assure you I feel it more than you can possibly do, and, of course, all those who know you here will be down on me.

"Please don't insult me by sending back any of the paltry things I gave you. As for the ring, if you don't want to keep it for auld lang syne, drop it quietly in the Colne. It won't be the first that has landed there.

"With deep regrets and apologies, and throwing myself on your mercy,—Believe me, yours sincerely,

"JAMES CARR STANLEY."

She let the letter flutter from her hand to the floor, and sat perfectly still gazing into the bright flame of the fire. She was in no way surprised, but there was a slow shame and indignation at her heart which for the time being banished everything else from her recollection. She had been fond of this man once, his gay, debonair ways and handsome face had won from her a passing regard. But she knew now that in spite of the pain at her heart, only her pride was hurt.

Looking back she scorned herself for having waited for this. She could so easily have been the first to break the tie. Then the thought of Cecilia Travers gave an added sting to the wound. There had been a kind of friendship between them once until Stanley intervened. Sitting there in the stillness, Alice went back over the past two years step by step. She remembered how doubtful her father had been of the engagement, and how in the last hours he had never seemed to take Stanley into account in his anxiety about her future.

She had wondered at the time, though saying nothing; now she guessed that that clearness of vision

sometimes vouchsafed to those about to pass within the veil had warned him that in his child's future Stanley would have no place. Although Stanley had only been five months in Colchester after the engagement, it had been long enough to convince Alice that he was not all her first fancy had painted him. And in his later letters certainly he had made no secret of the fact that money matters were troubling him greatly, and that his people were urging upon him the necessity of marrying a rich wife. Within the last year Cecilia Travers had come into a substantial fortune through the death of a rich relative, and was now therefore desirable in Stanley's eyes. Also she was on the spot.

Oh, the story and its sequence were very easy to piece together. Bit by bit Alice did so, with the same slow, bitter smile on her lips. It seemed as if the end of all things had come, as if fate had decreed that she should be cut off entirely from her past life.

She took the ring from her finger, an old-fashioned ring, set with small rose diamonds and an opal in the centre.

"I am far enough from the Colne," she said to herself. "But this will do as well." Then she leaned forward deliberately and dropped the thing into the glowing heart of the fire. Stooping down, she picked up the letter and, crushing it up, burnt it too.

"So, I may write finis on that page of the book of life," she said to herself. "What next?"

The muffled peal of a distant bell seemed to answer her, and she sprang up as if called to a forgotten duty.

Then she smiled bitterly again.

"I'm off duty, and nobody needs me anywhere," she muttered, and throwing herself on the bed, buried her head among the pillows.

She did not know how tired, how distraught she was.

None could have been more surprised than she at

the swiftness with which sleep descended on her eye lids.

When she awoke sore and stiff, yet strangely refreshed, she found that the fire had gone out, and that the little clock on the mantel-shelf pointed to four o'clock.

CHAPTER XII

A WATCH IN THE NIGHT

BUT if Alice slept, others were awake, in the old house.

At half-past ten the three servants from below ascended to their own quarters. The cook occupied a room alone on the fourth floor; a larger room was shared by Grace Jervis, the tablemaid, and Christina Caldwell. They did not agree very well. Jervis was what was called an experienced servant, and her contempt for the housemaid knew no bounds. When she came indeed, Jervis had declined to share a room with her, and to keep the peace Alice had given them separate beds. It was a very large room, originally the day nursery of the house, and it was a silent testimony to the strained relations existing between the young women that their beds were set in extreme corners of the room, as far removed from one another as possible. And when they happened to be in the room together they never exchanged a word. As a sort of sarcastic comment on the extreme exclusiveness of Jervis, Christina, not devoid of humour, had rigged up a screen round her bed out of an old clothes-horse, making her own part of the apartment like a little cubicle.

They retired to rest as usual, and before eleven Jervis was sound asleep. Behind the screen Christina had only made a pretence of undressing, and was lying down fully dressed, with the bedcover pulled over her,

at the moment when, without question or apology, Jervis put out the light.

"Here, I'm no ready, Grace! Nane o' your impudence," she called out, in a voice of pretended anger.

"You can finish in the dark then," was the cool reply. "I can't lie here all night waiting on you."

Christina continued to mutter things to herself, and to make a good deal of unnecessary noise, while pretending to undress. Finally both succumbed into silence, and shortly the snores of Jervis began to resound through the room.

"Jervis," cried Christina, in a voice of pretended alarm, "I hear something rinnin' across the floor. It's ower big for a moose; I'm certain it's a rat!"

Now Christina said this of a set purpose, knowing Jervis' terror of mice. As for rats, the mere mention of them nearly sent her into hysterics. That she made no sort of answer, but continued to breathe heavily, fully convinced, Christina, that she was really sound asleep.

She tried again, however, by dropping her Bible on the floor, but there was no break in the snoring. Therefore, Christina thought she might safely rise. Jervis had been careful to annex the warmest corner of the room for her own use, and Christina's bed stood opposite the door. There had been frequent wrangles on this important point, but on this particular night it suited Christina very well, for she was able to slip across the room and out by the door without having to cross a particularly creaking board about the centre of the room.

She softly closed the door behind her, and stole half-way downstairs, listening with both ears strained to catch the slightest sound. It was rather a windy night, and there were all sorts of creaking sounds wandering about the house, all in favour of Christina's project, which was to watch, if she could, what was going on in the sickroom. When she had been in the last thing,

at night to build up the fire and stock the coal-scuttle, she had on her way through the room taken the liberty of altering the situation of several articles of furniture in order to help her later on and facilitate the task she had set herself. Her one fear was that Dalglish might have observed the slight changes and have put the screen and big chair back in their accustomed places, when she would find some difficulty in hiding herself so as to have a fair view of the inner room. Also, it was just possible that Dalglish might have shut the communicating door, though Miss Harman never shut it herself, and had given strict orders that it was to be kept open night and day in order to purify as much as possible the atmosphere of the sickroom, which always seemed to be heavily charged with the smell of drugs.

The light had been left up in the hall ready for the doctor's late visit, and the staircase being of the well type, the light ascended and somewhat lightened the gloom of the upper landings.

Nothing could be heard or seen. The girl hesitated a moment, half afraid to venture, for if she were to be seen, or her design suspected, Dalglish would not spare her. She might even have some difficulty in convincing Miss Alice that her motive had been entirely disinterested.

Suddenly the wind rose with a gusty shriek, and, taking her courage in both hands, Christina slipped on to the landing where the sickroom was, and along the narrow corridor to the dressing-room door. It was quite dark there, and, as she had taken the precaution to remove her white apron, she was quickly absorbed in the general gloom.

The dressing-room door was wide to the wall, and the next moment she was in and behind the screen, which she was pleased to see had been left where she had carefully placed it. There was a faint light in the dressing-room cast from the bedroom beyond. Christina was surprised that it should be turned fully on.

Scarcely daring to breathe, she crouched down on the floor behind the screen and listened. The fire crackled once and the ashes fell with a little noise on the hearth, then there was another sound like the grating of a key in the lock.

Instantly Christina bobbed up her head, and, to her intense interest and excitement, beheld Dalgleish with her back to the dressing-room apparently busily engaged trying to open the cupboard door. Now Christina knew that Miss Alice kept the key of the cupboard in her own key basket, and that it was at that moment safe in the dressing-table in her room. Assured the proceedings were therefore unlawful and unauthorised, she watched them with a transcending interest.

It took a long time, and Dalgleish tried apparently innumerable keys with an exemplary patience worthy of a better cause. At last she succeeded; there was a little squeaking noise, a special wrench, and the door was opened. It revealed only an ordinary narrow press in the wall, with three deep shelves in the interior, with which Dalgleish was already perfectly familiar. But she peered into the inside as if she now saw it for the first time, and expected to come upon untold treasures. A few bottles and two boxes stood there. Dalgleish took them out one by one and examined them with the deepest interest, holding each bottle up to the light with that curious eager look characteristic of the prying busybody in full pursuit of a favourite occupation.

She was only interrupted by the distant boom of the front door bell. Instantly Christina hopped down, and held her breath. But Dalgleish, hastily pushing to the cupboard door, went out to the landing from the inner room, and thus did not come into the close proximity the watcher had expected. She could hear her foot creak on the stair, and with one bold jump she entered the bedroom to have a look at the occupant of the bed. She was lying the same still motionless figure,

se like death, that Christina crept back shaking her head.

"She canna last," she whispered to herself. "Eh, michty, sic ongauns!"

About two minutes passed before she heard them come up together and enter the room by the way Dalglish had left it.

Without even glancing at the bed, Ruthven walked to the cupboard and threw it open. He also took out the bottles one by one and carefully examined their contents. They were very innocent. One contained toilet vinegar, another eau de Cologne, and another brandy. One, half empty, contained a curious brown-looking fluid, at which the doctor looked with great distrust and curiosity, curling his lip as he read the label, giving the address of the herbalist in the Causewayside, with whom Miss Dempster had surreptitiously dealt for many years. Then he lifted a small mahogany box like a medicine-chest and carried it to the light. From Christina's coign of vantage she could see one half of the room, including the fireplace. The light was over the fireplace, and it was there that Ruthven stood. It was a very neat little case, which had seen service in many an Indian station, and was part of the few belongings of her father that Alice had kept. It contained at least a dozen small phials and some little drawers containing various drugs. Ruthven smelt and looked at all.

"Don't like this, Mr. Dalglish. Anything might go into a thing like this or come out of it. We'll need to watch her, I tell you. She's been most of her life in India, Miss Dempster told me, and they learn all about mysterious and dangerous drugs from the natives there."

Dalglish looked on open-mouthed.

"I tell you," he repeated, "we'll have to watch her on every hand. I am nearly sure that she's been giving the old lady something she ought not. If only

I could take away this case and thoroughly test the contents!"

"Could ye no take a bottle at a time?" suggested Dalgleish shrewdly. "I have aye the key, and ye could change them every night when ye come until ye get ower them a'."

Ruthven shook his head.

"Too risky, I fear. She'd be sure to notice it. No, no, Mrs. Dalgleish, the thing is to watch without relaxing and keep quiet about it."

"But hoo is it possible to watch in the daytime?" she asked. "I'll have to ha'e my rest some time, and there's naeboddy in the hoose bar Meikle that can be trusted. Jervis has nothing in her heid but lads, and as for that Caldwell, she's not fit to be in a decent hoose, let alone a room where there's trouble, so what are we to do?"

"We can only wait until things develop," replied the doctor cautiously. "We can apply certain tests later on. Meanwhile you can see that your mistress at least has the medicine regularly and faithfully while you are in attendance."

"I'll certainly do that, poor body; to think that maybe she's bein' slowly poisoned!"

The doctor interrupted her with a sharp hush and an uplifted forefinger. "You must be exceedingly careful as to what you say, Mrs. Dalgleish. I would not mention your suspicions even to Meikle. And remember that they are only suspicions, we have no proof. We may get it later on, if we are cautious and keep our eyes open, while appearing to see nothing. Now are you sure you observed the exact order in which the things stood on the shelf? Miss Harman has a very quick eye. If she once had the faintest suspicion that her secret hoard was being tampered with, we should not have the ghost of a chance of discovering anything."

"I ken exactly hoo they stood, doctor," said Dalgleish, immediately beginning to replace them one by one.

She handled the harmless medicine-chest very gingerly, as if mortally afraid its contents would explode to her hurt. Meanwhile the doctor turned to the bed, and took a more particular look at his patient.

"She's very cold, Mrs. Dalgleish. I'm afraid I must ask you to fill a couple of hot-water bags or bottles, and put close to her, and pile on some more blankets. The vital spark is at its lowest after midnight, and she's very far through."

Dalgleish turned hastily at these ominous words, and left the cupboard door open.

"I put the big kettle on the kitchen stove, saw to it myself afore I came up for the night, doctor. I'll just fetch it."

She went off at once, this time passing through the dressing-room, her stiff skirts swishing past the screen, a few inches from the crouching figure behind it.

The moment he was left alone the doctor walked over to the little table which stood between the windows, and Christina's head bobbed up again. Had he turned his head quickly he must have seen her, but Christina was determined to watch him also. She had never liked him, and she believed now that he was in league with Mrs. Dalgleish desiring evil to Miss Harman. He took from his pocket a little packet which he carefully undid. Mixing a small portion of a white powder with water he turned to the bed and administered it to Miss Dempster evidently with great difficulty. Christina moved dangerously near the door, in order to behold him in the act.

Then he went back to the cupboard, wrapped something up in a blue paper, and put it in one of the drawers of the medicine-chest.

Christina watched him closely here, and lost no single detail of his performance. She saw that he took nothing out, but put something there from his own pocket, a fact duly noted and remembered in the unfailing and correct diary of the girl's mind.

When Dalglish came labouring upstairs with her hot-water bottles, he was standing decorously by the fire, with his hands crossed behind his back.

"That's right; she'll be better of them," he said heartily, as he took one and folded back the bedclothes. "I've given her all she will need for the night, and if you feel inclined for a snooze in the easy-chair, Mrs. Dalglish, there is nothing to hinder you. If you could get enough rest in between to put you over at least a part of to-morrow, it might be to our interest."

"I'll no sleep the morn, doctor; you may trust me. I'll keep my e'e on that black witch, you may be sure."

"I'm sure you'll do your duty by your mistress anyhow, but you must not be indiscreet. If Miss Harman knows that we harbour the slightest suspicion of her, she will be on her guard at once, and we may never get any farther forward."

"But what for, doctor, would she seek to poison my mistress?"

"Oh, I did not say poison! You must be discreet, my good woman," said the doctor hastily. "There are in that medicine-chest, I am sure, all sorts of potent drugs. The Indian natives deal in love potions, and all kinds of strange and deadly things. My own idea is that Miss Harman is not trying to make away with the old lady, she would have absolutely nothing to gain by that, but that she is trying to get her to leave her at least a big slice of her money. Natural enough in an adventuress like her, isn't it?"

"Oh, the huzzie! but I hope Mr. Ruthven will see that she is cheated o' her greed."

"I assure you everything is absolutely safe up to the present, unless Miss Dempster recovers, and alters her will, which is unlikely. The professor who was here this evening quite corroborated my opinion, that it is merely a question of days."

Dalglish shook her head, and the doctor, putting on his greatcoat, with which he had entered the room,

prepared to go. He passed through the dressing-room, Mrs. Dalgleish following, and directly they were down the first half of the staircase Christina sprang up, and darted across the landing up to her own domain. And there she crept, shivering under the bedclothes, muttering "Eh mighty!" over and over under her breath.

CHAPTER XIII

A FRIENDLY FACE

ALICE slept heavily after she had undressed at four o'clock, and when she awoke again seven had rung. Confused for the moment, she could not remember where she was, and laid down her head to collect her thoughts. Then all the events of the past sixteen hours rushed upon her, and a feeling of hopelessness seemed to creep over her.

What had she to live for now? she asked herself, almost passionately. Everything seemed to be gone, and she a prisoner in a strange house, where her only friend was nearing the confines of eternity.

The thought of her aunt fully roused her to a sense of waiting duty, and she hurriedly rose and began to dress, the chill air of the room causing her to make even more than her usual haste.

Wrapping herself in a thick dressing-gown, she opened the door and went across the landing. There she heard the sound of sweeping, and beheld the faithful Christina busy at her morning work upon the stairs. "Good-morning, Christina," she said kindly. "I have slept so soundly I have heard nothing. Have you been in Miss Dempster's room?"

"Yes, miss, jist made up the fire; she's jist the same." Christina stood up to answer, and being under one of the gas lights, Alice got a good view of her face. And she was struck by its pale look and by the heaviness of the girl's eyes.

"Are you well enough, Christina? When were you up this morning?"

"Quite well, thank ye, an' I was up on the back o' six," she answered, but averted her eyes a little, as if not desiring to be further questioned. In the clear light of the morning the events of the past night were far more terrifying to Christina than when they had been actually transpiring. She had not yet got them marshalled in her mind, or arrived at any clear conception of her position or duty regarding them.

She had not slept at all scarcely, and her outlook was of the gloomiest.

"There is no need to be so zealous in the dark mornings," said her mistress pleasantly. "It is only burning gas, and the work can't be properly done. If you get down by seven after this it will do."

So saying she passed on to the sickroom, where she found Mrs. Dalglish regaling herself with a cup of tea. Alice bade her a curt good-morning, and approached the bed. Her aunt was now conscious, but apparently unable to speak, though her eyes followed her niece's figure and movements with the same lingering dumb entreaty. Alice bent over her affectionately, and inquired how she was. But no answer came.

"What kind of a night has she had, Dalglish?" she inquired, turning to the nurse with a slightly imperious touch, which seemed to rise naturally when she addressed her.

"Very good; slept all night, except when I woke her to give her the medicine," answered Dalglish pointedly; and not even stopping in her tea-drinking or betraying the faintest sign of respect.

"Did the doctor come?"

"Yes, at twelve o'clock, he stopped near an hour and we made her very comfortable," she replied, with a faintly impertinent touch.

"Well, you can take yourself and your tray down-

stairs now," observed Alice calmly. "And send up Jervis with my tea as quickly as you can."

She turned round, drawing herself up in indication that she would not be trifled with or disobeyed. Dalglish rose with a sour look, hot, angry words on her lips, but cowed by the dignity which forbade any demur. But her face was a study as she gathered the things together on the tray.

"Come back!" said Alice, as she was about to leave the room. "Take away these glasses and the bottle. Who had whisky in the night?"

"My mistress; anything ye see here is by the doctor's orders," the woman answered slowly, as she took the bottle from the mantel-shelf and set it on the tray. She left reluctantly, half-moved to openly defy and denounce the interloper, only deterred from it, indeed, by the memory of the doctor's warning. But Alice was quick enough to discern a distinct falling off in even the scanty respect hitherto shown her. And she determined that, whatever the consequences, she would not permit Dalglish to have unlimited sway over her aunt's room for another night. Although her rest had been somewhat broken, she felt refreshed by the hours during which she had been relieved from the strain, and, judging from the appearance of the poor, wasted figure on the bed, the end could not now be long delayed.

Christina came up with the tray, but did not seek to linger as usual. Once or twice during the day, indeed, encountering the girl, Alice was struck by something in her looks and different demeanour, and again asked her whether she felt well. But Christina only looked scared, and said "Yes". About three o'clock that afternoon a message was brought to Alice that a visitor waited in the drawing-room, Mrs. Marshall King.

She hesitated a moment, only anxious to see her, yet afraid to leave the room lest Dalglish should take her place. Dalglish had been very obtrusive all day, coming into and out of the room often, and on various

flimsy pretexts, taking no heed of the pointed assurance that her services were not required. Alice knew that the atmosphere of the house towards herself had undergone some subtle change for the worse. She felt herself being watched. For this she blamed Ruthven, and the interview between them when he paid his morning visit had been of a most uncomfortable kind. It was Jervis who brought the message, and Alice looked at her keenly, as if wondering whether it was worth while to put any responsibility upon her. Christina had been disappointing all day, quite evidently keeping out of her way, and not at hand when wanted. Of Jervis, Alice knew little beyond the fact that she was a good servant, experienced in all the details of her work. She had not, however, taken kindly to her or spoken much to her, except regarding household details.

"I should like to see Mrs. Marshall King," she said. "Could you wait here, Jervis, while I go down?"

Jervis looked doubtful.

"Mr. Maikle is out, miss, and there's the door. I'll send Christina up," she replied, and forthwith disappeared, as if mortally afraid she should be compelled to remain. Alice walked to the mirror to see whether she was fit to see a visitor, perhaps even wondering whether Mrs. Marshall King had come alone. She had wondered about them once or twice, and thought how like they were to the rest of the world, to make promises without troubling to fulfil them. As she gave her hair a hasty brush Christina entered. She had got dressed for the afternoon, and looked very fresh and rosy, the heavy-heartedness of the morning seemed to have disappeared. Alice noted it with relief.

"You can stay here, Christina, till I see a lady downstairs; and don't on any pretext leave the room."

"I winna, Miss Alice, I dinna be feared. I'll stick to it like a limpet, in spite o' Dalgleish's neck."

"You look better than you did this morning," said Alice kindly. "I have missed you all day, Christina."

"I have not many friends here. I have counted on you."

"Yes, maiss." Christina's big, beautiful eyes suddenly filled with tears. "I wasna mysel' this mornin', I was workin' oot a problem. It's workit oot, an' I'm richt again."

"That's right," said Alice, with a slight smile at Christina's explanation, to which, however, she did not attach the smallest importance. She knew the girl's position was rendered difficult downstairs, and supposed some of her own small troubles had fully occupied the horizon of her thought. She dismissed her from her mind as she left the room.

She found Mrs. King alone, a very trim and winsome figure in a long, close-fitting sealskin coat, and the most bewitching of bonnets. She rose with a quick smile to greet the girl, at the same time struck by her pale, worn looks.

"My dear, you look as if you had been shut up in a sickroom for weeks."

"So I have, Mrs. King. My aunt has been laid up since the day we met. She had a kind of stroke when we got home, and she has been very ill indeed."

"But recovering, I hope?"

Alice shook her head.

"Oh, no; I am afraid her case is quite hopeless. We had a consultant yesterday, and he gave no hope."

"Whom did you have?"

"Professor Gardiner."

"Gardiner! Why, I thought he had gone to Egypt for the winter in bad health!" said Mrs. King, in a puzzled voice. "Probably he has recovered if he is back at work again. I must tell Tom; he will be pleased. He has a great respect for Professor Gardiner; indeed, we owe him a special debt of gratitude: he certainly pulled my husband through a dangerous illness after he had been given up by everybody else. I am sure you liked him?"

"Oh, yes, I did; he was very kind," replied Alice readily.

"Well, I really came to explain what has happened to us," continued the little lady genially. "When we met you that day you would have thought there was nothing on earth we desired more than to see you again, speedily, and, indeed, that was quite true. But strange things have intervened. Soon after we left you there was a frightful accident in the street. Two children were almost run over by a big dray, the horses of which had become unmanageable. My brother, Jack, just managed to get in before them in time to save the children, but he was himself knocked down, and received serious injuries."

"Oh, how sorry I am to hear it!" cried Alice, in a voice of genuine regret.

"I knew you would be, and fully expected that you would have seen some account of the affair in the newspapers, or I would have written to tell you about it ere this."

"I am afraid I have scarcely looked at a newspaper since that day, Mrs. King. I have been entirely occupied with my aunt both day and night."

"Then you have not had time even to wonder about us; perhaps it is just as well. Jack is convalescent now, and up for a little part of each day. I am really here to-day to ask if you will come to-morrow and take tea with us, and see him. He has not been able to see many people, but he wishes very specially to see you."

The girl did not even blush, which somewhat surprised Mrs. King, and even piqued her a little. Her brother had talked a great deal about Alice Harman during the few days of his convalescence, and she feared that he was taking it rather seriously. She was there, indeed, at his express desire, though a little against her better judgment. She was very fond of her younger brother, and also extremely anxious to marry him to a special friend of her own, who would not be at all

averse to such an arrangement. But her match-making seemed likely to fail. He had not betrayed any anxiety to see the girl she was so anxious to recommend to him, while he had been distinctly eager about Alice Harman. And yet there was something about the girl that pleased and won her—a pathetic charm she could not have defined. Then she was so unmistakably a lady, with the air of breeding which cannot be acquired. And her very unconsciousness and lack of interest in Jack made her the more interesting.

"You are indeed most kind," said Alice quickly. "But I fear that to-morrow it will be impossible. I cannot leave my aunt. She is not now able to speak, but I think she misses me when I am out of the room."

"But it would do you good for an hour. I will send the carriage for you and bring you back," urged Mrs. King, the more anxious now that it seemed more difficult than she had expected. "You will be all the more able for the strain of nursing after a little break."

"I feel your kindness, but I must not take advantage of it just now," she said gratefully, and with a sudden softness in her eyes. "I don't know why you should be so kind to a stranger. I was only feeling to-day how much a stranger I am here, without even one friend now my aunt is about to be taken away."

Involuntarily she covered her face with her hands, and her bosom heaved slightly with an emotion she could not control.

It was enough to rouse all the sympathies of Jack Traquair's warm-hearted sister. She rose and crossed the room to the girl's side, and laid her kind hand on her shoulder.

"My dear, I will be your friend if you will let me, and I assure you my brother wants to be very friendly, indeed. That is why I am here to-day."

"Thank you very, very much. I hope to show you that I do appreciate it one day," replied Alice, looking up with the sweet smile which illuminated her whole

faze, and made it so much more winning. "Meantime I must devote myself to my aunt; she will not need me long, I am afraid, and this is such a strange house! If you knew how I am situated here you would pity me. I am without a friend."

Before Mrs. King could reply a furious peal from an upstairs bell resounded through the house. Alice, recognising it, hurriedly rose.

"My aunt's bell! There is only a little housemaid in charge there. Will you excuse me? I must go up. Good-bye. Please tell Mr. Traquair I hope he will soon be well, and give my love to the jungle boys."

She offered her hand. Mrs. King bent forward and gave her a kiss, then trotted out to her carriage almost as much in love with the girl as Jack himself.

Before the hall door closed behind the visitor Alice was in the room upstairs. The bell, hastily rung by Christina in a moment of terror, had summoned others besides Alice. Dalglish stood at the bedside with her arm round the shoulder of her mistress, trying to raise her in her bed. The doctor entered behind, having come in as Mrs. King was leaving the house. But there was nothing any of them could do.

The feeble sands of life had filtered through the glass.

Miss Dempster was dead.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

RUTHVEN left the house as soon as he decently could, and, calling an empty cab crossing the Square, jumped in, and bade the man drive him post-haste to St. Andrew Street. The moment Ruthven, senior, at his desk at the front window, saw the cab stop he looked out eagerly, half-expecting to behold his son. Nor was he disappointed.

He had the door open by the time Patrick had ascended the stairs, and led him in without a word.

"Is she gone?" he asked, the moment the door was closed.

"Yes," replied Pat, with half a gasp. "Get me a mouthful of brandy, will you? Are we alone?"

"Yes, my lord hasn't seen fit to come back; he won't come now. If he does he'll find himself paid off. When did it happen?"

"About an hour ago. Ugh! that's better. I'm thankful the job's done. Gad, what an infernal strain it has been on me!" said the doctor, wining his brow with his handkerchief.

His father filled up his glass, and he drained it again.

"A bit sudden at the end, surely, wasn't it?" he asked anxiously. "Did you happen to be there, or had they to send?"

"Just got there in time. No, she died easily, suddenly, in fact; just blew out like a candle."

"Miss Harman present?"

"Just got up in time; she was downstairs with some caller at the moment, and the old lady was in charge of that housemaid girl; showed great carelessness. I said so pretty strongly to Miss Harman."

"I thought you had put Dalglish on the track?"

"So I had in the night time, but of course she was supposed to be off during the day. We got into that cupboard last night, and found all sorts of things there in a medicine-chest. I added a little contribution of my own just to make sure later on, if necessary," he said, with a curious lowering of the eyelid. His father nodded, perfectly understanding, and himself took half a glass of brandy neat.

"I tell you she's a queer one!" said the doctor, on whom the raw spirit was beginning to tell. "But Dalglish and I were too many for her last night. How the old girl hates her! These feline amenities are a great help in a case like this. You can always play upon them. Dalglish proved herself a grand amateur detective last night, and got inside that press in a most workmanlike manner. She quite enjoyed it, too, and is absolutely convinced that there's been some tinkering with the old lady."

"On whose part?"

"Oh, Miss Harman's; in fact, she calls her a black witch, and considers her capable of any crime. I've done my best to foster that little idea. It may come in useful later on."

"But you were careful, very careful, Pat? Remember no woman can be trusted farther than you can see her. She'll turn round and play you false at every turn. I've proved them scores of times."

"You may leave it to me. I've managed that little delicate bit of machinery A1," answered Pat, with a cocksure air, which almost convinced his father.

"And left no loophole from which they could possibly punish on you, I hope?"

"You bet! Gardiner was a grand *coup d'état*. You

deserve something for that inspiration. Well, I came over to see what's the next move. Hadn't you better go to George Square and take all the arrangements in hand? It's better to take the whip-hand at once."

"Yes; but we must not be too aggressive. You're too hasty, Pat. My policy will now be consideration and conciliation. You've done your part. Leave Miss Harman now to me."

"No objections in the world, I assure you," said Patrick, and reached for the bottle again, but his father gently removed it.

"You've had enough, Pat. Even if your work is done, you needn't make an ass of yourself. There's a lot to be gone through yet, and you'll need all your wits about you."

"Well, tell me how things will stand. Shall I be able to leave the beastly hole where I am now, and set up in Queen Street or Charlotte Square?"

"Certainly; there's a corner house in Charlotte Square. I was looking at it the other day, and think it would suit you all right. And I might have a couple of rooms in it, though I intend to leave Edinburgh and take a little place in the country. I'm sick of this sordid struggle. I'll turn over a new leaf, Pat, and, perhaps, who knows, may die in the odour of sanctity yet."

Patrick grinned and shook his head.

"The rôle would hardly suit you, I doubt, grov. But we needn't decide anything in a hurry. When will the contents of the old lady's last will and testament be disclosed?"

"On the funeral day, I suppose. This is Tuesday. We'd better say Friday at half-past two. I'll see Miss Harman about it. By-the-bye, how did she seem to take it?"

"She never spoke. She has a mighty cool way with her. I don't believe she has any feelings. She did not omit to look at me as if I were taboo, I assure you, but

I didn't spare her. I as good as told her she was responsible for the old lady's death, leaving her in such incompetent hands while she played madam the hostess to some of her friends downstairs. It was Marshall King's carriage. I didn't forget to inquire whose was the grand turnout as I went into the house. Now, how in the name of all that's wonderful did she get in with that exclusive set?"

The lawyer shook his head.

"She's a person to be reckoned with, Pat, and don't you forget it," he replied significantly. "Now, we'd better decide what's to be our programme. If we can afford to be generous, we might make her a gift of a thousand pounds."

"Which she would probably throw in your teeth if you tried it," said Patrick, with a grin. "I tell you she has pride enough for anything. I wouldn't be too soft over her, guv., if I were you. After all, she won't be any worse off than when she came. She was a beggar then."

"But she's old Kate's own kith and kin," said the lawyer, and Patrick stared, astonished at his father's unusual clemency and consideration. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Upon my word, guv., you're a queer fish, and I give you up as a conundrum. Do what you like, only make sure that we have enough. How much did you say would come our way after everything's paid?"

"Twenty thousand each, at least. I spoke to her about five months ago about leaving a thousand to the infirmary, and Meikle gets five hundred, and old Dalgleish a thousand; Chisholm, the coachman, a thousand, too; so none of them can grumble. I think we'd better let Miss Harman have the house, though it is supposed to be sold and the money incorporated with the rest of the trust funds."

"How much is the house worth?"

"About three thousand pounds, and the furniture

another five hundred, say. Then there's the old lady's personal belongings, her clothes and trinkets; we'd better let her have them all."

"Strikes me she's going to come off well, guv'; but she should be made to understand that she has all that of our bounty—yours, if you like; but so long as it is the name of Ruthven she's beholden to, I don't mind. I owe her that in return for many a bad quarter of an hour she has given me. I tell you she can make a chap feel pretty cheap with these haughty eyes of hers."

"You can leave it to me. After all, we don't do badly, Pat, and may congratulate ourselves. Is there anybody there with her now except the servants?"

"Nobody. I offered to send somebody in, and she declined, with a look which put me outside the door pretty quick."

The lawyer rose, locked the little corner cupboard where his special store of private refreshment was kept, and took his hat and coat from their peg.

"I suppose you sent away your cab?"

Ruthven nodded.

"We can get another one. Are you coming, then? I'll go over and see what's what. I'll have to interview her sooner or later, you see; the sooner the better."

The precious pair left the house together, and hailed the first empty cab crossing Princes Street. . .

Patrick left it at the corner of George Square, and walked out to his own domain, facetiously observing that it was his consulting hour, and somebody might be awaiting him. He had no desire to enter Miss Dempster's house again, saying, in response to his father's invitation, that he had finished his job and must be excused.

He had an odd look as he walked, even glancing furtively around him almost as if he feared to find himself shadowed by some Nemesis. He was beginning to realise, though only very faintly as yet, what he had done, and, being less experienced in roguery than his

father, felt his nerves weaker than he could have desired. It was getting grey dark as he fumbled with his key in his own door, promising himself another stiff brandy and soda when he got inside. He observed a light in the dining-room, and without removing his hat stalked in. A woman sat by the table, a woman of slight figure, who rose a little hurriedly at his entrance. She had a sweet, attractive face, not indicating much strength of character perhaps, yet with something winning about her. She smiled somewhat deprecatingly at sight of him, noting quite well the frown which overspread his face as he recognised her.

"I'm afraid you're not very glad to see me, Pat; but I had to come. There's something to be said that can't wait."

"Oh, I'm glad enough to see you, Jessie; but, hang it all, it isn't wise to come hunting me up here. Didn't my housekeeper wonder? I hope you didn't say anything?"

"Not I. I said I wanted to see you professionally, and would wait as she expected you soon in to tea."

"I'd offer you a cup of tea, only she might wonder. Did you walk in from Corstorphine?"

She nodded.

"And I'm very tired. I should like a cup, Pat; never mind her," she said persuasively, and he rang the bell to order in his tea. His housekeeper, an elderly, stolid-looking person, did not seem to wonder at all; she brought the teapot at once and closed the door.

"A model of discretion is Miss Macdonald, but it mustn't occur again, Jessie. Well, what do you want?"

"I want to know when you are going to marry me, Pat," she said coolly. "I've waited five years, and they're making such a fuss about it at home that if it can't come off soon father and my brother Bob will take some steps in the matter. I heard them discussing it last night, and I thought I'd better come and tell you about it to-day."

"But I explained to you, Jessie, that it would be two years at least yet before I could marry you," he said uneasily.

"You've been four years in this house; at least it'll be four years next Martinmas. It's a long time to have waited, and I'm not going to wait any longer. I'm saying this on my own."

"There's no money, Jess," he said gloomily.

"There must be some," she replied. "It wouldn't take any more to keep me than Miss Macdonald, as you call her; and I'm not afraid of work."

"But you don't understand," he said desperately. "In my position it would be quite impossible for my wife to be doing a servant's work, answering the door and what not."

"I could do the work inside, and nobody would be any the wiser," she replied stolidly. "And we could get a cheap girl for the door. Oh, I've thought it all out scores of times, and it's high time it was coming off. Pat, so you'll have to name the day."

She spoke with a quiet assumption of authority which galled him inexpressibly. He dared not say a word, for he was under heavy obligations to her and to her father, who held his note of hand for several hundred pounds advanced to him when at college, on the understanding that he was to marry the girl when he was established in his profession.

Had he really cared for her he could have implemented the promise long ago, but his brief passion was now dead, and his sole desire was to get rid of the entanglement. He need only be patient for a few more days, he reflected, and then he could pay old Rossland the money and interest he owed and snap his fingers at the whole crew. They were people of no class whatsoever, Rossland keeping a pawnshop in the West Bow, familiar to too many of the college boys. It was through paying frequent visits to his emporium that Ruthven had seen Jessie first, and been attracted by her

pretty face. Old Rossland, clever and astute, besides being ambitious for his daughter, had got him gradually into the toils, and held his written promise to marry her whenever circumstances would permit. On their account he had removed his domicile as far as possible from the scene of his business operations, and they lived now in a new villa on the slopes of Corstorphine Hill. He had shown a good deal of patience in waiting so long, but was now determined to bring Ruthven to the point or mete out due punishment to him for his faithlessness. For Jessie was the apple of his eye; she was a good girl, and would have made Ruthven an excellent wife. But he had tired of her long ago, and had no intention of fulfilling his promise.

But he gave no sign of this, and even affected a pleasure at sight of her he was far from feeling.

"I shouldn't care to see you doing that, Jess," he said kindly, "and if only you'll have patience a little longer something's sure to turn up."

"You never come to see us," she said jealously. "I've been hearing things. I believe you're in love with that girl that has come to live with your old lady patient in George Square."

Ruthven flushed up to the roots of his hair. He did not even know that the girl had found out the fact of Miss Harman's existence.

"You think you're very clever, no doubt, Jess, but this time you've overshot the mark," he said coolly. "For she hates me like poison, same as I do her, and we've been playing a game at cat and mouse all the time the old lady's been ill."

"Is she any better?" she asked casually, as she helped herself to another cup of tea.

"She's dead, Jess; and if you'll only have patience a few more weeks. and don't worry me, I expect it'll be all right."

"You're expecting a haul then?"

He nodded.

"A good big haul, lass, then we'll make up for all this waiting," he said confidentially, reflecting that it would certainly be better to send her home in a good-humour to report favourably to her father, and so give him time to arrange his affairs.

∴ "It'll be a little while, of course, before I come into anything actually, but there'll be no doubt of it in the end, so you'll promise not to worry me, won't you, Jess, because you see I've had a good deal to worry me already?"

"Oh, I can promise that as long as it's only for a few weeks, and I'll keep them quiet at home too," she said good-naturedly. "You're very comfortable here, Pat, and I'll be real pleased to get back to the town. Corstorphine is very dull, especially in the winter."

Ruthven suffered her to babble on, and even encouraged her, and she left for home soon in a high good-humour, seeing herself in the near future mistress of Patrick Ruthven's house and home.

But nothing was farther from his intention.

CHAPTER XV

THE SECRET DRAWER

RUTHVEN, senior, arrived at the house in George Square to find the blinds decorously drawn in token of the fact that its mistress was no more. Meikle had his face adjusted to the proper mournful expression, and commenced to shake his head directly he opened the door.

"So it's all over now, Meikle," said the lawyer, in subdued tones. "Well, it'll come to us all sooner or later, and Miss Dempster has had a long life."

"Yes, sir, I've been in her service seevin' an' twenty year come Whitsunday," he observed, in somewhat sentimental tones. "It's a long time. I was but eighteen at the time, an' no big for my age."

"You haven't grown much since then, Meikle," the lawyer could not refrain from saying, though he immediately changed the subject. He naturally loved a joke, and seldom permitted the queer side of things to escape his notice. Meikle's assumption of decorous sorrow and sentimental reminiscence tickled him immensely. He knew that in Miss Dempster's house there never had been the service of love, and that there was no real regret for her decease.

"I'll need to see and consult with Miss Harman, Meikle," he said. "Where is she?"

Meikle shook his head.

"I dinna ken; up the stair most likely. There's been ructions in the very deid-chamber," he replied. in a

shocked voice. "She wadna let Mrs. Dalgleish touch the mistress. Ter an' that besom, Christiny, dressed her themself's the door lockit. Dalgleish, she's greetin' in the kitchen, an' ragin' when she's no greetin'. Oh, it's a reg'lar ploy, an' nae mistake!"

"Dear, dear," said the lawyer, shaking his head and preserving his most serious expression, though he was inwardly in a high state of cheerfulness. "Can't they stop wrangling even in the presence of death? Women don't have any sense of proportion, Meikle."

"Maybe no, sir," replied Meikle, comprehending but dimly. "Will ye go to the dining-room or I tell Miss Harman?"

"The library, Meikle, and as it's to the back we can have the blind up. I think myself we make death a lot more horrible than is necessary."

He pushed open the door of the familiar room, and striding to the window drew the blind up to the very top. Dalgleish had herself walked from attic to basement drawing down every blind, and taking a melancholy satisfaction in the task. Alice had not yet been downstairs, or she would certainly have intervened. She had small sympathy with the desire to shut out the light and the sun, and cared nothing at all for conventional custom.

Ruthven poked up the fire, and looked round the room in which he had so often spoken with the dead woman; even now it seemed haunted by her presence. Her high chair, the desk where she kept her money and accounts, and which he saw was locked and the key gone, the few books on the little table, and the work-bag above it, all evoked memories of many a half-forgotten day. He shrugged his shoulders more than once, and wished Miss Harman would make haste. He expected a somewhat trying interview, and had carefully considered the attitude and tone he should adopt in discussing affairs with Miss Dempster's niece. Strong and secure in his own knowledge of how matters

stood, he could afford to be both patient and conciliatory, and he had fully decided to offer her the house and all its contents, also to offer to dispose of it for her in the very best market. He felt himself in quite a glow of unusual generosity, when the door opened, and she glided in. She had seldom looked more attractive, he thought, but her manner was very distant and haughty, and she carried herself like a young queen.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Ruthven. I am sorry I have kept you waiting, but I had much to do upstairs, and I thought perhaps you might have given me until to-morrow morning."

"I have no wish to intrude, dear lady," he said, adjusting his voice, which could often sound very pleasant and sympathetic to the proper tone of respectful sympathy. "But there are certain things which in a case of this kind must be seen to at once. And as I know your poor aunt's mind on all matters pertaining to her death, I thought that the sooner we discussed the arrangements together the better. Probably you will be glad to leave them in my hands."

"Oh, yes, up to a certain point. You can send in the undertaker, and tell me who ought to be employed, as I am a stranger in Edinburgh," she replied quietly. Ruthven noticed that she did not offer to sit down, and the fact annoyed him. "It seemed to show that she had no desire to prolong the interview, but the reverse."

"The family burying-ground is in Greyfriars Churchyard," he began, and she nodded quickly.

"My aunt took me to see it one day; it is close by the grave of the martyrs. You will give instructions for the vault to be opened, and I thought Friday would be a suitable day for the funeral."

"Just my own idea," he said suavely. "I will send in the undertakers when I leave here, get the certificate from my son, and get her death registered."

She made no reply, and he even imagined that she tried to hide the expression in her eyes.

"What can of death will Dr. Ruthven certify?" she asked clearly.

"Why, natural causes, of course; she had an apoplectic seizure in the first instance, but I have not seen him to inquire what he will actually put in the certificate. Well, I suppose you will leave the details to me, trusting me to carry them out in a sober but substantial style befitting Miss Dempster's standing and position."

"She wished everything to be very plain. She made me write out her directions explicitly some time before her death. I have copied them out, and there they are, Mr. Ruthven; perhaps it will not be necessary for me to wait while you read them?"

"If you please, Miss Harman, I would prefer it," he replied, as he took the envelope from her hand, and removed the sheet of paper from within.

"It is very explicit indeed, even to the price of the coffin," he said, in a surprised voice. "But there are some things here naturally that surprise me very much: that she should wish Dr. Guthrie, for instance, to conduct the service. Her own minister will feel it very much."

"Miss Dempster did not think so; she had not spoken to him nor been in his church for eleven years," replied Alice quietly.

"Well, well, these are small matters, Miss Harman, and I will see that all her wishes are carried out. You were aware, I suppose, that I have been my cousin's legal adviser for a long period of years, and was fully cognisant of the manner in which she wished her property disposed of?"

He composed his sentences adroitly, taking everything for granted, and keeping a narrow watch for the effect produced.

But absolute indifference was the only expression on the girl's face. She disliked the man intensely, only in a less degree indeed than the son, whom she abhorred,

and she had not as yet given her own future a single thought. She opened a small leather bag, which hung by a ch  telaine chain at her side, and from it took a long shining key of curious shape and pattern.

"The key of this bureau," she said briefly, as she handed it to him. "My aunt desired me to give it to you, and to tell you that you were to do what you like with what you found there, which seemed to indicate that she reposed in you the confidence you speak of."

She spoke quietly, but whether sarcastically or not Ruthven could not determine. He did not care. His eyes involuntarily gleamed as his fingers closed over the key, and he tried to hide his surprise and gratification.

"I may leave you now," she said, turning towards the door, "and if you have anything to say to me after you have been through the papers you can ring."

She glided from the room. He only waited until she should be out of hearing, then turned the key in the lock. The locked door was familiar to him, who all his life long had been hiding something from his fellow-men. His fingers trembled a little as they fitted the key in the old-fashioned, curiously shaped lock. It went smoothly enough, and turned it without any strain.

The interior of the desk was very neatly arranged, though singularly bare. A few accounts docketed and fastened together lay in one of the pigeon-holes, and some letters of no particular account filled another. He knew the construction of the desk with which he had been familiar for many long years, and he found the secret drawer without difficulty. It was characteristic of Alice Harman that she had never thought of opening the desk herself since the death, or of being beforehand with Ruthven in discovering the contents of the secret drawer. A long paper in an envelope of parchment lay within. Ruthven took it out with fingers that trembled, such important issues hung to

the ice. As he spread it out and made himself master of the contents his brow cleared, and an expression of lively satisfaction took the place of the hunted, anxious look. There was something more, even an expression of gratitude. For his cousin had not forgotten him and his. The document was the only will so far as he was aware that Miss Dempster had ever written, and, with the exception of some substantial legacies to the servants, everything reverted to him and to his son.

Alice Harman was not mentioned even by name. A feeling of pity for her, born perhaps out of his own thankfulness, rose up strongly in his mind. After pondering the poor, crabbed writing again for some time, as if anxious to assure himself that he made no mistake, he put it down, and rang the bell. When Meikle came he desired him to ask Miss Harman to favour him with a few moments' conversation. She came almost immediately. Already he had mapped out a programme for his own performance.

"I have made an examination of the contents of the bureau, Miss Harman, and, though they do not greatly surprise me, yet I should like to ask you a question, if I may do so without presumption?"

"You may put the question, Mr. Ruthven; what I may think of it is another matter," she answered candidly.

"Did Miss Dempster express any anxiety about your future or suggest what you should do after her death?"

Alice shook her head.

"She never alluded to it even in the most distant way, Mr. Ruthven."

"Did she—pardon me if I seem inquisitive, but the matter is a trifle urgent, and in the circumstances perhaps even painful—but did she tell you that her affairs were entirely in my hands? We were friends of a lifetime, and she had the utmost confidence in me, latterly,

when, she did not ask a single question regarding her investments."

"She never spoke of these matters to me, Mr. Ruthven," replied Miss Harman steadily. "Nor did she ever mention your name in connection with her business affairs."

The lawyer looked surprised, even incredulous.

"Miss Dempster did not make a will in the ordinary sense, though she told me about this paper. About a year ago, on my suggestion, she added a few codicils chiefly dealing with charities in the city. Nothing has been done since. I shall be sorry, Miss Harman, for your sake, if she said nothing to you about your future. Doubtless she thought there would be plenty of time. But we never know what a day may bring forth. It is my duty to tell you that some few weeks ago I suggested to her that, as you had become an inmate of her home, it might be wise for her to revise her will, and add something to it on your behalf. I repeated my suggestion at various intervals, but she put me off each time."

Alice watched him narrowly, though with a slight air of fatigue, which seemed to indicate that the subject did not interest her in the least.

"Need we discuss it meanwhile, Mr. Ruthven? I repeat I know nothing about my aunt's affairs; she never spoke of them to me, or appeared to have any anxiety concerning them."

"But it is your future, dear lady, that concerns me. Miss Dempster's will, as it now stands, contains absolutely no provision for you, and, unless she has made you any private gifts, your position will be deplorable."

"I am not troubling myself concerning it, sir," she replied. "I can go back whence I came. I have many friends in Colchester, and one at least who will give me a home until I can look out for myself."

"Your courage and fortitude are admirable and

unusual," he said impressively. "But the idea revolts me. As Miss Harman's sole executor, you may rely upon me to do my utmost for your interests. Even judged from the lowest, most sordid standpoint, your devotion to your aunt during the last weeks deserves, and shall receive—I repeat it, shall receive, recognition."

Alice smiled faintly and somewhat wearily.

"You are very kind to trouble about me; it is unnecessary. I had no ulterior motive to serve when I came here. I am no fortune-hunter. Being only a recent acquaintance, as it were, of my aunt, I expect nothing, and he who expects nothing cannot be disappointed."

She turned to go, but Ruthven, agreeably surprised, felt his generous impulses grow and well within him.

"But, Miss Harman, there are certain moral obligations one cannot set aside," he said impressively. "I repeat that it will be my endeavour to keep your interests in the foreground. I am sure you will find that none of the beneficiaries under the will will make the slightest demur. The house, for instance; if the house were yours, you could realise, and find yourself with a very good sum in hand. It is one of the best houses in the Square, and well worth three thousand pounds at least. Properly exploited, it might even fetch more."

"Well, Mr. Ruthven, perhaps; but need we discuss problematical situations? I am very tired, and must ask you to excuse me."

She retired with a slight bow, and without appearing to see his outstretched hand.

He rubbed his own together as the door closed and looked extremely perplexed.

"Can't make her out," he muttered. "Either she's a fool or an arch-plotter. Which? Well, she'll be clever if she can plot against me."

Ruthven had had long and varied experience of life,

but he had yet to prove the potency of innocence and simplicity of heart. He was conscious of a vague uneasiness, however, as he left the house, and it was not until he actually held Miss Dempster's last will and testament, drawn up by his own hand, before his vision once more, that he felt himself reassured.

CHAPTER XVI

MISS DEMPSTER'S WILL

NEXT morning due notice of Miss Dempster's death appeared in the obituary column of the *Scotsman*, and was commented on at many breakfast tables. For though the old lady had long since dropped out of the social circle in which her position and means entitled her to move, her name was well known, and her eccentricities often spoken of.

One interested individual, however, did not happen to see the announcement until he had reached his office in Frederick Street. He examined his letters first, and then sat down for ten minutes at the newspaper before attacking the day's work. It was Robert Warburton, the lawyer upon whom Miss Dempster had called on the last day she and her niece had been out in the carriage together.

Now, Warburton had been much impressed by the old lady that day, and the haste with which she had desired everything done had surprised him. Acting on her directions, which were most explicit, he had drawn up a new will, couched in the simplest language, but leaving no doubts as to her intentions and desires. She had evidently considered it to the last item, and there was not a moment's hesitation in her utterances or in the directions she gave Warburton during that brief but memorable interview. He had been more than pleased to see her, for he was a comparatively young man, to whom each new bit of business was important.

He, in common with many other Edinburgh folks, knew Miss Dempster by repute, and he had heard both his father and mother speak of her frequently. Her visit was a very pleasant piece of news to carry to the wife who had recently married after a long period of waiting, and they had rejoiced over it together. But neither of them had any idea that he would be called to administer her estate at such an early date. He had thought the old lady a curious, even a weird looking, figure seeing her that day for the first time, but he had not the smallest suspicion regarding her mental capacity, which seemed so keen and clear as to be almost disconcerting. The document had been prepared with great rapidity, read over carefully and approved by Miss Dempster, and duly attested in the presence of accredited witnesses. It was therefore a document absolutely valid. Warburton threw the newspaper on the floor, and, unlocking the safe, took out the packet, which was carefully tied up and docketed in the usual way.

It did not take long to read, and when he put it back he rose to his feet with a kind of undecided air. It was a matter of great moment to at least one person, and he wondered whether it would not be his duty to call upon her without delay. He finally decided that it was, and, having given some instructions to his clerk, put on his overcoat and left the office.

He found Miss Dempster's house, not by the number, which he had forgotten, but by its drawn blinds. He ascended the steps somewhat reluctantly. A modest, unassuming man, he almost feared to intrude at such a time, and the lady he must see was a complete stranger to him. But the information he had to impart being of a pleasant nature somewhat encouraged him.

The decorous Meikle admitted him, and put him in the library, where a cheerful fire was burning, and the blinds of the window looking out upon the back garden, which in its turn converged on the Meadow Walk, were

partially drawn up. A lady writing at the desk rose in some surprise at the announcement of his name. She had given Maikle orders not to admit the Ruthvens, father or son, so long as she remained in the house, now she would at least be its mistress, and their work was done.

She remembered the thin, pleasant, intellectual face of Warburton in a moment, though his name had conveyed nothing to her.

She liked him. His grey eyes had a straight, honest look, and his mouth, though firm, had a mobile sweetness which betokened a kind heart.

And Alice was in need of some kind touch; she was feeling utterly forlorn, and had just been unburdening herself partly in a letter to Mrs. O'Brien.

"I must apologise for an intrusion, Miss Harman," said Warburton, in response to her pleasant good-morning. "I am here in consequence of the announcement in the *Scotsman* this morning."

"Oh, have they put it in?" she asked, with a slight surprise. "I have not even opened the paper this morning. You see, I have scarcely had time to get accustomed to northern newspapers."

As she spoke she opened the paper, which still lay neatly folded on the centre-table. The simplicity of the announcement pleased her, and the mention of her aunt's exact age was interesting.

"At 84 George Square, on the 17th, Miss Katherine Dempster, in her 68th year."

"You knew my aunt, Mr. Warburton," she said, looking towards him. "She called upon you, I remember, that last time we were out together. She was taken ill that day after we came home."

Warburton inclined his head.

"That was the first time I had the pleasure of seeing Miss Dempster, though I believe my parents had some acquaintance with her some years back. I had no idea it would be the last as well as the first time."

"Nor had I. She seemed so well that day. I had not seen her so bright for weeks, not indeed since I came to the house. We have had many trying weeks since then, Mr. Warburton."

Her eyes in spite of herself suddenly filled, and Warburton's face softened. He thought her beautiful, and there was a pathetic charm about her he could not have defined. He no longer wondered at the strong terms of affection in which the old lady had spoken of her.

"I suppose you are aware of the object of Miss Dempster's visit to me that day?" he asked gently.

She shook her head.

"I am not. My aunt never spoke to me of business matters. She was not at any time communicative regarding herself or her affairs, and I have, happily for myself, not been born curious."

"But, as it happened, that was a most important interview so far as you were concerned; in fact, it concerned you entirely."

"How? I don't understand you," she said simply.

"But surely you have an inkling?" he suggested. "You have not been long an inmate of this house, I understand, but surely you are aware that your aunt was a very rich woman?"

"I have heard so, but I have never seen any evidences of it here, Mr. Warburton. The household was conducted on economical, even penurious, principles, and though my aunt was kindness itself to me after we learned to understand one another, she never gave me the impression of having riches to bestow, and I have never believed the rumours I have heard from time to time."

"Nevertheless, she died possessed of more than fifty thousand pounds, Miss Harman, exclusive of property and personal effects."

Alice clasped her hands and looked at him incredulously.

"I can scarcely believe it! And how is it you can"

“speak so positively? I understand that my aunt's affairs have been left entirely in the hands of Mr. Ruthven, of St. Andrew Street; indeed, he told me so only yesterday.”

Warburton opened his eyes, and sundry small uncertainties that had been in his mind were instantly dispelled.

“Ruthven! Ah, that explains; but I am afraid unless Miss Dempster has had business relations with Mr. Ruthven since that day, the document in my hands will alter, nay entirely set aside, anything he may possess.”

“As to that I cannot say. My aunt has certainly never transacted any business since that day; she has seldom been able to speak more than a few consecutive sentences after it. And Mr. Ruthven never saw her until yesterday, after she had passed away, though his son was in attendance.”

At this Warburton looked, as he felt, surprised. He knew the name of Ruthven by repute and nothing to its credit. That a life so important as Miss Dempster's should have been left in the hands of one who had so little professional standing as Patrick Ruthven surprised him more than he could have expressed.

“You surprise me; but I suppose they were friends of old standing. Tell me, did Miss Dempster ever hint that she felt any distrust of Mr. Ruthven?”

Again Alice shook her head.

“Never, she was very reserved; how reserved you can have no idea.”

“Then the contents of the document she caused me to prepare will be a surprise to all.”

“To me, probably,” said Alice, but apparently without curiosity. “Mr. Ruthven assured me no later than yesterday that no provision had been made for me, and that her means had been all disposed of at least a year before I came.”

“Then my information will be a pleasant surprise to

you, Miss Harman. I have not the document with me, but its provisions are simplicity itself. With the exception of some legacies to charities, a special bequest to Dr. Guthrie, and some remembrance of the servants, you are left absolutely her sole legatee."

"Mr. Warburton, it is impossible. I am sure my aunt had no such intention. She never, even hinted at it to me or led me to expect anything. As I told Mr. Ruthven yesterday, he who expects nothing cannot be disappointed."

"But, Miss Harman, it is only right and just. You are, I understand, Miss Dempster's only surviving relative. You are not only her natural, but her legal heir, and you would even have been justified in contesting any will that ignored your claim."

"I should not have done that, Mr. Warburton. You tell me, do you, that my aunt of her own free will caused you to make a will in my favour that day when she sent me away?"

"She did; she came with it written in her own hand. I had only to copy it, and have it signed and attested. It was a very simple, but yet a thorough job. Nothing can shake your claim. I must congratulate you on your accession to such a fortune."

To his surprise she suddenly threw herself into a chair, and covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, daddy, daddy!" she cried. "Why has it come too late?"

CHAPTER XVII.

MR. WARBURTON INTERVENES

AS Warburton passed out Dr. Ruthven came up the steps to the house. They looked at one another casually, but in Ruthven's eyes there leaped a quick suspicion. He did not know Warburton, but he had a professional look he did not like.

"Who was that, Meikle?" he asked, as he passed into the house.

"A Mr. Warburton, sir; there's his caird."

Ruthven made a rush to lift it from the hall table and ran his eye over what was inscribed thereon.

ROBERT GRAHAM WARBURTON, S.S.C.,
32 Frederick Street.

"Who is he, and what did he want? Did Miss Harman see him?"

"Yes, he's been in a guid half-hour."

"You have no idea, I suppose, what brought him?"

"No, but Miss Harman came oot wi' him hersel', and they seemed very friendly like. She had the caird in her hand, and left it on the table. That's what way it's there."

"Where is she now?"

Meikle jerked his thumb in the direction of the library door, and at the moment it opened, and Alice came out.

She merely recognised the doctor by a distant inclination of the head and proceeded towards the stairs.

He, however, in no way abashed, addressed her by name.

"May I speak to you a moment, Miss Harman?"

She shook her head.

"There is nothing more to be said, Dr. Ruthven," she replied, and proceeded on her way, as if she had dismissed him and his business from the horizon of her life for ever. He reddened furiously, and even shook his fist, Meikle looking on decorously from the background.

"She gae me my orders this mornin', sir; she wadna see either you or Mr. Ruthven," he said, in his small, complacent voice.

"She'll maybe have to see more of us than she likes yet, Meikle, and anyhow it would pay her to keep a civil tongue in her head. Has my father been here this morning, then?"

"No; the gentleman ye saw gaun oot was the first visitor, but she's had a lot o' letters."

Ruthven grunted, and putting on his hat again left the house. He could not rest until he had told his father about Warburton's visit, which somehow seemed to him a bad omen. The day was yet early, and as he had now no professional duties, there was nothing to hinder him taking a walk across to the office. He found his father with all the papers relative to Miss Dempster's estate spread about him in fine confusion.

"Good-morning, Pat; occupation gone, I suppose? You'll need to be on the look-out for another dripping roast," he said, with a touch of vulgar facetiousness which Pat was not in the mood to stand.

"I've just been at the house; got an infernal snub from the marchioness. She looks like one, upon my soul she does. But something else I saw there upset me a lot more. Do you happen to know a chap called Warburton, an S.S.C.?"

As he spoke he tossed over the card which he had put in his pocket at the house.

"Heard of him, and I knew his father. Where did you get this?"

"At George Square; met him on the steps; he'd been closeted with her half an hour, Meikle told me. What do you suppose it means?"

Ruthven, senior, leaned back in his chair, looking perplexed and concerned.

"It looks queer, unless she's taking advice about contesting the will or something of that kind. You see I put the whole thing pretty clearly before her yesterday, so that she would know what to expect. And she took it well, I thought; didn't seem to care a hap'orth whether she got anything or not."

"That's her policy, depend upon it; she's a deep one. I'd give something to know what that fellow's business was this morning. I suppose there's no way of getting at it?"

"None that I can think of. I couldn't very well call and ask him," said the old man grimly. "I shouldn't look so scared, Pat, if I were you. It's all right, boy. This takes a lot of getting over."

He indicated the wealth of documents with a comprehensive wave of the hand, and Patrick tried to look reassured.

"I've a beastly feeling about the whole business, dad, and I wish the suspense were over. Last night I slept badly, and had horrible dreams."

"Too many nightcaps, lad! How many had you after you left me?"

"A few," he admitted modestly. "You see a fellow wants something to settle his nerves."

"You talk too much about your nerves, Pat. When I was your age I had none; but then I didn't indulge in nightcaps. Listen to this."

He proceeded to read to him the last codicil that had been added by Miss Dempster to the will in August of the previous year. It was all very good reading to Patrick Ruthven if he could have banished the memory

of Wagburton's strong, grave face from his recollection. It recurred again and again, but nothing could be done. The intervening forty-eight hours had to be passed ~~sol~~ ^{alone} ~~show~~. A few invitations to the funeral had been issued by Ruthven in Miss Harman's name, and several she had addressed and posted herself. So it came to pass that the six mourning coaches were full when they left the house to bear their burden to the old kirkyard of the Greyfriars. Dr. Guthrie had conducted a very brief service in the drawing-room, and in response to Alice's urgent invitation had promised to return after the funeral to hear the will. Explicit directions had been left by Miss Dempster regarding the proceedings of the day, and she had expressly named the persons who were to be present in the library for the customary reading of the will. It was an 'old-fashioned custom she had remembered since her girlhood, and it had pleased her that the discomfiture of the Ruthvens should be public and complete. Alice, only aware of the broad facts of the case, cared nothing either way; she sat down in the big dreary drawing-room after the cortège started, tearless and calm, with a curious set look on her face. She had one friend with her to take the edge off her desolation. Mrs. Marshall King, on consultation with her husband, had driven with him to the house for the service and remained while they went to the churchyard. They had been asked to the funeral by Alice herself, for though they were very recent friends she liked and trusted them, and believed them sincere. Traquair was not yet able to be out of doors, but she was not out of his thoughts that day, and he had ventured to send her a note of sympathy, which, however, she had not yet acknowledged.

"It is a curious idea this to read out the whole legal settlement in front of those who are left," said Alice. "When my aunt spoke of it I asked her what it meant. She said it was the custom, and it had always been done in her family."

Mrs. King faintly smiled.

"It is done in the case of great or important families where there are substantial estates to leave. I confess I think you might have been spared this ordeal."

"It will be horrible. I understand that the Ruthvens expect to be the chief beneficiaries, and their disappointment will be frightful. Did you see old Ruthven glare at Mr. Warburton when he came into the room just before the service began? It was horrible."

"I did see it. I was talking to my grandmother the other day, dear, and she told me that there was an old love affair between Ruthven and your aunt."

"Indeed?"

"So I am led to believe; then something happened, and he married some one else. Nobody thinks much of him in Edinburgh, and nobody would be surprised to hear that he had looked after his own interests to the exclusion of everybody else's."

"I could not refuse to go down, I suppose?" said Alice, a trifle nervously.

"I am afraid not. Why should you mind? You are perfectly innocent, and need care for none of them."

"I dread the whole affair," she said, with a slight shiver. "We had better have some tea before they come back. Oh, this seems such a big, gloomy house! I shall be glad never to see it again. Although, had my poor aunt lived, we might have had some happy days in it together. I was only beginning to know her when she was taken away."

"I wish for yourself she had lived, and I hope in any case you will not leave Edinburgh."

Alice looked surprised as she shook her head.

"Oh, I shall go back to Colchester, I think. I do not feel at home in this city."

There was a low knock at the door, and Jervis, very in her new mourning, entered to learn her mistress's bidding.

Some tea at once, Jervis, and see that the fire is

clear and bright in the library, and everything ready for them coming back."

Jervis withdrew, and Mrs. King made an unusual remark.

"I don't care for that girl's face, Miss Harman. Is she a good servant?"

"She knows her work; none of them are nice, if you know what I mean. My only friend in the house is a little housemaid called Christina Caldwell, a protégée of Dr. Guthrie."

"Will Dr. Guthrie come back with them?" asked Mrs. King.

"He promised to do so, and I hope he will. I shall need the few friends I have, I feel sure."

She had a prevision of trouble which was not disappointed.

Within the hour the first roll of wheels indicated the return of the first carriage, and she rose nervously.

"They are coming back. Will you come down with me, dear Mrs. King, and stay by me through this ordeal, which Mr. Warburton assured me I could not escape? It was expressly stated in my aunt's will that it was to be read in the library before certain persons. But I feel very nervous about it."

"You had better wait, my dear, until they are all in, and send for you, don't you think?"

"Well, perhaps, but I wish it were over," she said, clasping and unclasping her hands. "I have a horrid anticipation of evil somehow, and God knows I have no desire to deprive any one of their just rights. Perhaps my aunt, though wishing to be kind to me, has done me a doubtful service."

Mrs. King had gathered from these words that Alice expected some provision had been made for her; no conversation regarding her future had as yet passed between them. Meanwhile a mourning coach containing Ruthven and his son had stopped at the door, the next following, containing only Warburton. He ran

up the steps and touched the elder Ruthven on the arm.

"I have been trying to get speech with you all the afternoon," he said politely. "Is there anywhere we could have a word together before we meet the interested company?"

Ruthven positively glared at him, while his son, white with apprehension, waited open-mouthed for what was to follow.

"I fail to understand what you can have to say to me, sir," replied Ruthven, with an assumption of hauteur his inward tremors ill bore out. "I suppose you are acting in the interests of Miss Alice Harman. If so, it will be time enough to hear your views before the interested company, as you express it."

"I don't think so, Mr. Ruthven," returned Warburton, pointedly if quietly. "I think you had better grant me the few minutes I desire. It will certainly be in your own interests."

Another carriage, with the clergymen, came up to the door, and they were obliged to pass within.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MISS DEMPSTER'S WILL.

RUTHVEN, familiar with the whole interior and arrangement of the house, opened the dining-room door and motioned Warburton in.

His face was grey with apprehension, and he had the greatest difficulty in controlling his expression so as to appear unconcerned.

"I thought it wise to have a word with you, Mr. Ruthven, before we went to the rest of the company," said Warburton pointedly. "I daresay you may have some expectation of what I am about to say. On the day when she was taken ill Miss Dempster called upon me for the purpose of having a new will drafted."

"Well?" said Ruthven, and his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth.

"Acting upon her instructions, which were most explicit and had evidently been carefully thought out, the document was prepared."

"But it could not be properly attested, seeing she was taken ill that very day," said Ruthven thickly.

"Pardon me, it was: the whole affair was so concise and brief, though at the same time comprehensive, that it was done in half an hour. It was signed by Miss Dempster in the presence of my clerk William Scrymgeour and Mr. Adams, the accountant, who has chambers on the same floor with me."

"And you suppose this to be Miss Dempster's?"

valid testament? inquired Ruthven, with a slight sneer.

"I know it to be so, sir, and I thought it might be well to acquaint you with part of the contents at least before we go to the other room."

"Well, what are they?"

"With the exception of a few small bequests, none of them of any magnitude, Miss Harman is her sole legatee."

"I see; a case of sheer coercion and undue influence, if ever there was one, sir," cried Ruthven, white with wrath. "If you had taken a little trouble to ascertain the true facts of the case, to fathom and discover this young woman's motive, or to inquire into her treatment of the poor old lady, whom she managed to get completely into her power, why, you, sir, as a respectable practitioner, would have refused to have anything to do with a document so infamous."

"With such facts, which, however, I do not accept as facts, Mr. Ruthven," observed Warburton calmly, "I had nothing whatever to do. Miss Dempster spoke in terms of evident affection for her niece, and her one regret seemed to be that she had not known her earlier."

"Ah, I suppose Miss Harman was present when these interesting assertions of devotion were made."

"She was not. Miss Dempster came alone, and until I called upon Miss Harman the day after her aunt's death she was in total ignorance of any document in her favour."

"You are a novice at your profession, Mr. Warburton, to be taken in by such assumption, which is only the usual ruse of an adventuress. I tell you if you knew the actual facts of the case, as they have been known all along to me and my son, you would have refused to be a party to such a fraud which deprives innocent and deserving people of the just reward of faithful service, covering a long period of years of thankless bondage."

"I think Miss Dempster was mindful of all who served her," said Warburton dryly. "Perhaps now we had better go in next door, where they must be wondering at our delay. I asked these few words with you in order to prevent any undue expression of disappointment in the presence of those assembled."

"Most kind and considerate, I am sure," said Ruthven, with an ugly sneer. "I may as well give you notice before we go that it is my intention to contest this will, if need be, before every tribunal in Scotland. You will find that you have tackled a mighty unsavoury business, sir, in your anxiety to turn an honest penny. It is not likely that those who have served Miss Dempster with a lifetime's devotion, who have never received the value of a penny piece in return for their services, will stand tamely aside and allow an adventuress like her to reap the whole benefit."

"Those who served Miss Dempster for nothing have themselves to blame," replied Warburton quietly. "It is a bad policy always. Experience might have taught them that, Mr. Ruthven."

A slight tap came to the door, and Meikle put his head round it.

"If you please, Miss Harman's compliments, and will you come to the library at once, gentlemen?"

Warburton nodded and was the first to leave the room. Ruthven followed, wiping the sweat drops from his brow and the grey moisture that was gathering about his twitching mouth. He was to be pitied in the hour of his desperate downfall. The moment the door of the adjoining room opened to admit them, Patrick Ruthven, the picture of uneasiness, observed from his father's looks that something unforeseen and terrible had occurred. And his own face reddened first and then paled, as he made room for him on the leather couch beside him. Miss Harman stood by the table. Mr. and Mrs. King, feeling themselves perhaps somewhat alien to the proceedings, stood a little apart in one of the

windows. Dr. Guthrie, erect and grave, and benevolent-looking, before the fire; the minister of Miss Dempster's own parish, a small, nervous-looking man, was sitting at a side table turning over the pages of a book. All these persons, with the exception of the Kings, had been named by Miss Dempster as those she wished to be present on the occasion. Alice spoke first.

"We wait what you gentlemen have to say to us," she said, with an admirable composure and the grace of a young queen. "Some who are present have not a great deal of time to spare. Be good enough to proceed."

Warburton, after a moment's hesitation, approached the table, on which he laid the package he held in his hand. He was not at all nervous. The consciousness that he had done nothing to merit blame, also that he had helped to render signal service to one who deserved it, gave him a quiet courage. And he did not look at the malignant, anxious faces of the Ruthvens as he began to speak.

"So far as I am concerned, Miss Harman," he said quietly, "my task is quickly done. On the 28th of January last, at three o'clock in the afternoon, the late Miss Dempster called upon me at my office in Frederick Street. She was quite alone, and it was the first time I had met her, though I knew her both by name and repute. She quickly acquainted me with her wish, which was that I should make a will for her which she desired to be regarded as absolutely her last will and testament, for which purpose she had brought her own explicit instructions. There was not a moment lost in discussion or explanation—it was a mere matter of my writing to her dictation the following document, which was properly signed and attested before she left my office, and is therefore valid, as it purports to be her last will and testament. Have I, the permission of Miss Harman and those present to make its contents known?"

Alice inclined her head, and the little company strained their ears to listen with varying degrees of interest.

"The language is the language of Miss Dempster," explained Warburton, as he unrolled the sheet of foolscap. "I remind you that I simply wrote to her dictation, and have not altered a word she spoke that day.

"This is to certify that I, Katherine Dempster, being in my sound mind and judgment, this twenty-eighth day of January eighteen hundred and forty-two, do make here and now my last will and testament in the presence of Robert Warburton, S.S.C., of 32 Frederick Street, Edinburgh, whom I hereby empower to carry out my instructions faithfully in every detail.

"I leave to my faithful friend and coachman, Samuel Chisholm, the sum of one thousand pounds, in token of my appreciation of a good driver, and a man who could hold his tongue.

"To Rebecca Dalgleish, who has also served me, though with middling faithfulness, five hundred pounds and certain articles of apparel which shall be hereafter mentioned. To Andrew Meikle, my butler, five hundred pounds, together with the suggestion that he and Dalgleish might marry, and put their savings together to make it go farther. They have lived a long time under the same roof, and should not be so easily taken in by one another. To the housemaid, Christina Caldwell, fifty pounds, on consideration that she remains faithful to the service of my niece, who has done so much for her already.

"To the Rev. Dr. Guthrie, the sum of five thousand pounds, to do whatever may seem good in his sight, to spend on himself or on other folk. It will be spent wisely I do not doubt. And I would add that perhaps had I known him sooner I might have been a better woman. The only return I ask for this is that he will continue to befriend my niece, Alice Harman, so long as she elects to remain in Edinburgh.

“To the Rev. Thomas Gillies, minister of the Greyfriars, a hundred pounds, in token of my gratitude that he has left me in peace, and not tormented me to attend his kirk.

“To my cousin and old acquaintance, Patrick Ruthven, the elder, fifty pounds, and the cedarwood box that I have showed to my niece. It is to be given him unopened, the key being long lost, but he will doubtless find ways and means of getting into the inside.

“To his son, Patrick Ruthven, L.R.C.P., and what not, fifty pounds, and a bit of advice-- to seek out a rich wife, for otherwise he will never reach his ambition, which is to call himself a rich man.

“Finally, to my well beloved niece, daughter of my one and only sister Lily, the residue of my estate, comprising my house at 84 George Square, and all it contains, together with all the money left after the above legacies shall be paid. And I pray God bless her, and give her the happiness she deserves, and which she sought to bestow on me the little while we were spared together. And she shall do as she likes with it all, without let or hinder, for she has learned the value of money in the hard school of poverty, for which she is none the worse.

“And I direct that the contents of this will shall be made public on the day of my burying, in the library of my house at 84 George Square, in the presence of the following persons.” Here followed the names of those present, which Warburton recited over steadily as he laid down the document.

There was a moment's tense silence. Alice Harman's eyes had overflowed at the tender and memorable words in which her aunt had referred to her, and she was for a moment unable to speak. Dr. Guthrie was the first to break the ice.

He took a few steps to the side of the girl who stood motionless by the table, and extended his hand.

“My dear, may I congratulate you upon a noble

inheritance justly bestowed?" he said, in a clear voice audible to the whole company. "May God aid you to spend and use it aright."

He felt her slight hand tremble in his, and pressed it warmly with an assurance of sympathy and encouragement. Her eyes answered him, though her lips did not. Mrs. Marshall King turned then, and would have spoken the second word of sympathy and congratulation.

But she was arrested.

At the moment the storm broke, and those who witnessed it never forgot it to the day of their death.

CHAPTER XIX.

DISAPPOINTMENT OF THE RUTHVENS

THE Ruthvens rose as if with one accord, and the elder approached the table. Alice was on the other side of it, and she met his gaze calmly, though at the same time perfectly conscious of its malignance.

"I give notice to those whom it may concern," he said thickly, "that the document just read by this gentleman I believe to be, if not a forgery, at least the outcome of coercion and undue influence. My intimate knowledge of Miss Dempster's mind during the last six months enables me to assert that in her ordinary judgment she would never have concocted a scheme so extraordinary and unjust. My son, who has attended her for the last four years, and who saw her through her last illness, can testify that she was in no fit state to frame such a document on her own account."

Warburton turned upon him sharply.

"Miss Dempster was perfectly well that day she came to see me. What causes conduced to her seizure I cannot pretend to say, but I am prepared to assert on my oath if need be that she was perfectly capable that day, and not only capable but remarkably clear and far-seeing in her outlook. Further, the suggestion of undue influence is condemned on the very face of it, as we have Miss Harman's word that Miss Dempster never discussed business matters with her, and that she had not the faintest idea of her aunt's intention to leave her anything."

"Miss Harman's word!" cried Ruthven, in an extraordinary passion which he made no attempt to conceal. "What is that worth, pray? Who is Miss Harman? Does any one know what her past life has been?"

Dr. Guthrie interrupted him with uplifted hand.

"Hold your tongue, man; you don't know what you are saying," he said sternly. "I would suggest that the business for which we are called together being now over, we should disperse, and leave this house to its decent mourning."

He placed himself as he spoke partly in front of Alice, as if to protect her from the hatred plainly expressed in Ruthven's eyes.

Pat, observing that his father's rage had become ungovernable, and prudent enough to see that nothing was to be gained by a further exhibition of it, laid his hand on his arm.

"Come away, guv." he whispered. "This is no place for us."

But the old man, like a lion enraged, refused to be appeased or to withdraw. He was literally shaking with impotent wrath and disappointment, and for the time being cared nothing for the consequences or the impression left by his sorry exhibition. His usual diplomatic caution seemed to have deserted him.

"This is no time nor place for revelations," he sneered. "The atmosphere, to say the least of it, is hostile: But I give fair warning that this iniquitous bit of jobbery will not be allowed to drop. Miss Harman knows what I mean, and she need not be surprised when just vengeance and retribution overtake her."

"Shut up," said Patrick Ruthven savagely, and, taking his father by the arm, removed him forcibly from the room. When the door closed a visible shiver of relief passed through the little company.

"Dear me!" said the little minister nervously. "What extraordinarily unpleasant people! Who are they anyhow?"

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None replied to him. Dr. Guthrie had turned his attention to Alice, who had been much upset by the sudden savageness of the attack upon her. She was not crying, however, only her face was deadly white, and she seemed glad to sink into a chair.

"Never mind them, dear. One can easily see that a poor fellow's share of the blame for his own share is so small," whispered Mrs. King at her side. "They are not really worth paying any attention to."

They tried to reassure her, and after a time she became more like herself.

Meanwhile in the hall outside Ruthven had given free vent to his frightful rage and despair. Fearing that his father would take a fit of some kind, Pat got him out of the house, and hailing the nearest cab drove him to his own house in St. Patrick Square. And there they sat down to face the whole ghastly situation. After a strong potion from Pat's black bottle the old man became less excited, and more capable of rational discussion of the state of affairs.

"You made an awful ass of yourself, guv.," said Pat plainly. "And I was glad to get you out to save further exhibition."

"It's easy for you to speak: you've nothing to lose. I have everything. In fact, I'll need to flee the country. I was looking to this money to square me up elsewhere. Do you know that I've squandered the whole Turnbull Trust, and young Edward Turnbull is getting a bit restless, and pressing for a settlement? Then there's the mortgage on Stenhouselee—that has been spent too."

"In the name of wonder, what on?" asked Pat blankly. "Strikes me you've been playing the game in pretty high-flyer style, guv."

"Unlucky speculation, Pat, nothing else," groaned the old man. "It's a certain fact that if some of this money doesn't come my way they'll have me in a felon's cell before I know where I am."

Pat, the picture of dismay, began to walk restlessly to and fro the room.

"Say, guv., honestly, man to man, supposing we should contest this will, do you think there would be the ghost of a chance of our winning?"

"There would be, if your evidence was strong enough, Pat. Everything would depend on that. You would need to be prepared to swear to anything. And wouldn't you have Dalgleish and Meikle at your back?"

"Yes, they, and the old lady especially, will be pretty mad. She expected a thousand. I told her she would get it too."

"Well, that's our only chance; but where are we to get the money for the law expenses? My credit's gone. It's a blue look-out, and it strikes me that the easiest way out would be a dose from some of your precious bottles. You'd better keep one in readiness for me. Ugh! if it weren't for the hereafter I wouldn't care how soon. This has taken the wind clean out of my sails."

He looked a pitiable wreck indeed. Pat walked to his consulting-room, and got something to help to steady the old man's nerves, for he at least was determined not to give up the struggle yet.

"If you think we have the ghost of a chance it's just possible I might be able to raise the money," he said quietly. "If we lose, there'll be the costs, of course, and they would be pretty stiff."

"A thousand would hardly cover it, Pat; but where could you lay your hands on any guarantee for that amount? I didn't know you had any rich friends."

"I'll see about it, guv., only you mustn't ask any questions," he said, with a somewhat lordly air. "Five pounds! A ghastly cheek old Kate had after all my trouble and attention. Failing everything else, I can put in a claim on the estate for professional attendance covering a period of four years, and I can make it pretty stiff."

"I could supplement it with my little bill of costs," said his father ruefully. "It would mount up into hundreds, and we might get the half of it, but that's only a drop in the bucket. If you could get some one to come forward and finance us through this business, for proper acknowledgment, of course, it's just possible we might get even with her yet."

"I'll see what can be done, and let you know, perhaps to-night," said Pat, in whose mind a plan was already maturing.

He walked with his father part of the way towards the new town, and then, retracing his steps, sought the once familiar emporium of old Rossland in the West Bow. He walked through the outer shop with the assurance of one who needed no direction, though the young woman in charge looked at him askance. He could see the bent head of old Rossland through a glass screen round the desk near the door of the back room, and when he appeared suddenly like an apparition at his side, Rossland started.

"Hulloa, it's you!" he said ungraciously. "An unexpected honour surely. What's up?"

Daddy Rossland, as he was familiarly called by the lads who made his acquaintance, was a somewhat benevolent-looking elderly gentleman as little like the ordinary sharp money-lender as could well be imagined. But he was a shrewd business man; once caught in his toils none of his clients escaped until they had paid to the uttermost farthing. The name of Daddy Rossland unfortunately was known far beyond the confines of Edinburgh, and many irate and disappointed parents in other parts of the country had written to him or interviewed him regarding the escapades and shortcomings of their sons, and none of them had found Daddy either conspicuously long-suffering or conspicuously generous. He thrived on the weaknesses of his kind. It is a sordid business, bound through time to exercise a most deteriorating influence on the character. Rossland was not

so much surprised as he might have been had his daughter not acquainted him with her recent conversation with her lover, and he took his appearance there as a good sign. Therefore his manner, though outwardly a trifle gruff, was really cordial enough. And Pat Ruthven, who had experienced that manner in all its varying shades, felt reassured by it.

"I want a little private conversation with you, Daddy," he said, venturing upon the old familiar designation. Rossland came down from his stool, and threw open the door of the back room, which was furnished like a parlour, and had been the scene of many momentous and some stormy scenes.

"So the old lady's pegged out?" he observed significantly. "I saw the notice, and Jess told me what you were expecting. Is she buried yet?"

"Yes, to-day. We expected what we haven't got, Daddy," said Ruthven gloomily. "The will read to-day sounded sorry stuff in our ears, I can tell you."

"Well," said Daddy, looking out from under his bushy brows with a somewhat lowering, even threatening, gaze.

"It's practically all gone to that two-faced minx that came up from Colchester. I suppose Jess has told you about the niece, who turned up a pauper a few weeks ago?"

"Yes, she told me; and so everything's gone to her, has it, and nothing at all to you? You must have played your cards devilish bad, Pat?"

Pat shrugged his shoulders.

"It's easy for you or any outsider to speak," he said gloomily.

"Well, and what are you here for; what do you propose to do now, and what's your governor saying to it?"

"My governor has hardly got the length of speech. He's partly paralysed. It's rough on me, but ten times rougher on him, Daddy, for he's been practically a slave

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to old Kate for the last twenty years, and has never got a penny for it."

"How was it done then? The young one must be a clever one."

Ruthven gave him a brief outline of the facts of the case, to which Rowland listened with close attention.

"So he thinks he'll contest the will? Does he honestly believe he has the ghost of a chance?"

"Yes. I can help him a lot. I saw things behind the scenes about which I could have kept dark, don't you know, if it had been to my advantage. But seeing she's robbed us of everything, why should I?"

"Why indeed? But it'll be an expensive business. Your father isn't conspicuously well off, I understand?"

"He hasn't a red cent to bless himself with, Daddy," answered Ruthven guilelessly. "Can't you guess my errand? I've come for Jess's sake as well as my own to see if you'll give us a leg up; in fact, to use plain language, to ask whether you'll see us through. Don't look so wild, Daddy, but listen to reason, and hear what you'll gain by it."

Ruthven sat down, though not invited to a chair, and began to talk in a low voice and very earnestly, like one who has a big stake at issue.

It was a long interview, and when he finally left the shop in the West Bow, first looking about carefully to see that there was no one in sight likely to recognise him, he left it with a light airy step, like one who has got a load off his mind. Instead of going home he proceeded northwards to St. Andrew Street once more, and arrived there about seven o'clock.

He possessed a latch-key for his father's door, as his father did for his, and admitted himself without ringing. It was all dark; evidently his father had not returned, or had gone out again.

He went into the office first and lit the gas; then he observed standing on the desk a square cedarwood box. Instantly there flashed into his remembrance that it had

been left in the will. Some one must have brought it to the house, unless his father had returned for it. The latter had happened. Naturally of a curious and prying nature, Ruthven without a moment's hesitation tried the lock. There was no key, but the point of his pen-knife cleverly inserted quickly raised the lid.

There was nothing inside but letters, piles of them, folded and docketed, and tied with faded ribbon. He undid one of the packets, and ran his eye through one of them. Then his face assumed a look of blank astonishment. For he had evidently chanced upon a bundle of old love letters that somewhere back among the forgotten years had passed between the dead woman and his father. They were real love letters, written even in passionate language, and there was a curious look on Ruthven's face as he read them.

But no finer feelings urged him to close the box and shut them away from a gaze for which they were never intended. So absorbed was he that he did not hear the opening of the door, and his father was in the room before he could hide his mean action. The old man did not look angry, however, though his jaws set a trifle hardly.

"If you've read all you want to read, Pat, we'll make away with the little lot," he said, in a curious voice, and, placing the cedarwood box and its contents in the empty fireplace, he put a match to it, and watched the whole consume to ashes.

CHAPTER XX

TRAQUAIR'S COURTSHIP

AS the Marshall Kings drove away from George Square the little woman turned to her husband impulsively.

"It's all up with Jack, Tom," she said enigmatically.

"What do you mean, Lucy?" he asked, with that large show of patience with which he was accustomed to treat the somewhat erratic flights of his wife's imagination.

"Don't pretend you don't understand," she said severely. "Haven't I told you twice already that he is quite smitten with her? Haven't I gone out of my way to show kindness to a girl whose very antecedents I knew nothing about, and now it's all up with him?"

"But why?"

"Oh, stupid, the money, of course. Jack hasn't a penny, and he isn't that kind of man."

"But he might become that kind of man, Sparrow," he said, reverting to an old nickname by which her intimates had known her as a girl.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself for ever hinting at it. Why, you know, he might have Ellen Montgomery for the asking, and she is rich enough."

"But he doesn't like Ellen, and, according to your showing, he likes this one," observed Mr. Thomas King soberly. He loved to tease his wife, to see the spark in her eye, and to get her worked up into a miniature

passion, happening to possess the whole art of soothing her again.

"Well, but it's such a lot of money, Tom," she said, with a sigh. "I wish you'd be serious for once, and discuss the thing properly. Didn't she take it well? I believe she's really the only girl I ever met who doesn't care for money for its own sake."

"But she seems to know how to dress. I daresay she'll make it fly like the rest of you in that interesting direction."

"She knows how to put on her clothes, Thomas, which is not quite the same thing," she answered witheringly. "Alice Harman is the sort of woman that would look well in anything."

"But better in an expensive frock, Sparrow," he said insinuatingly. "I quite agree with you about her: she's a fine young woman; there's something likeable and straightforward about her, though I believe she could make a man sit up. I'll tell you what I didn't like—the looks of those Rutlens. What a pair of precious scoundrels they are."

"You really think so, Tom?" asked the little woman in an almost breathless whisper. "I know Miss Harman didn't like the doctor in attendance. And, oh, I forgot to tell you, they had Gardiner in consultation, so he must be back from Egypt."

"He isn't," answered Mr. King stolidly. "I met Evelyn yesterday, and she told me her father and mother would not be back for another month, though he's mending."

"But, Tom, Alice distinctly told me he had been there, and how much she liked him."

"She or you have made a mistake in the name probably," he answered tranquilly. "I assure you, Evelyn said they were still at Shepherd's at Cairo. Well, so you think Jack's smitten? How many affairs is this he's had?"

"Oh, Tom, how wicked you are to say that about

Jack, when you know how anxious I am to get him settled, and how obstinate he is."

"Well, to put it properly, how many affairs have you arranged for him?" he said teasingly. "I don't think this one would be a success. Isn't she a trifle too clever for Jack?"

"Clever women like a plain, decent, honest man that they can depend on; that's why I married you, though you don't deserve such a pretty compliment."

Mr. Thomas King thereupon bent down and kissed his wife under the brim of her big black hat, which seemed to throw up the extraordinary fairness of her face.

"Do be serious, Tom!" she pleaded, though with a wavering smile on her lips. "Don't you feel sorry for the girl, and don't you think we ought to show her a bit of kindness in spite of Jack, and anyhow he'll be going back to Blenkenfoot soon?"

"I do think so, I like her very much. Don't you remember I told you about her the day the boys came home, and wondered how we could get a chance of showing her a little kindness? And though the old lady has left her the money she's not through the wood yet. I saw mischief in that old ruffian's eye if ever it existed anywhere."

"But what could they do, Tom? I am sure the will was explicit enough."

"Oh, yes; but they might contest it. Even if they hadn't the ghost of a chance, they could make it very hot for her. She's not the kind of woman that would enjoy all sorts of unsavoury details in a Law Court. And they'd stick at nothing. Revenge was written plainly enough on their faces."

"Old Miss Dempster was a lady," said Mrs. King musingly. "How could she bear these men near her? They are both so obviously underbred."

"Old women get cranky, my dear, especially when they have eschewed the wholesome discipline of matri-

mony. She, it appears, was crankier than most. But we'll stick up for the girl, and do what we can to help her. I suppose you'll be seeing her soon again?"

"She's coming to spend the whole day to-morrow. I'm determined to give Jack a chance in spite of the dollars."

The carriage drew up at the door of their own substantial dwelling at Heriot Row, and Mrs. King tripped into the house.

The invalid was now in the drawing room able to move about a little with the aid of a stick, and he had been impatiently watching for their return for the last hour.

Mrs. King did not keep him any longer in suspense, but ran upstairs, and sat down to give the news without so much as taking off her hat. She saw his face distinctly fall.

"Fifty thousand pounds," he said, with a prolonged whistle. "Then it's all up with me, Lucy."

"Just what I said to Tom, but he didn't think so."

"You told Tom, Lucy?" he said, with a slight flush. "But I suppose you can't help it?"

"No, I can't. When I keep anything from Tom, Jack, there'll be something radically wrong in this establishment. Well, there isn't any use saying any more, is there? She's coming to spend the day to-morrow, quite quietly. After such a frightful strain she needs a rest, so you'll have a chance of a decent talk with her at least."

"The old lady's pile will rise like the walls of Jericho between us," he said gloomily. "It was a different matter with a forlorn, friendless girl, as she was the day I saw her first. A fellow could presume a little on the situation then. He daren't now."

"As to being forlorn, I question whether she isn't more so now than ever, Jack. Myself, I consider her position frightful: all alone in that great gloomy house, surrounded by a greedy horde who hate her, and would

like to poison her, I believe. They look exactly like it, and I shall advise her to get rid of them all, and sell the house. It's not fit for her to live in. But what she will do after that, unless she providentially marries some decent man, Heaven only knows."

Lucy King judged from her own standpoint, forgetful of the fact that the girl had been reared in a different atmosphere; also, she was not aware as yet of her courage and resource. Already Alice Harman was making plans for the future without any of that indecision which marks the average woman face to face with such an extraordinary upheaval in the course of events.

Next day about noon she arrived in a cab at the house of her friends in Heriot Row, and was warmly welcomed by Mrs. King.

"You are later than I expected, my dear. I suppose you will find a good deal to occupy you for the next few days?"

"I've had a trying morning with the servants," she admitted frankly. "They're going one and all, except Christina Caldwell, the little housemaid, about whom I told you."

"I remember her well. Were they pleased with what they got?"

Alice shook her head.

"No; furious. That woman Dalglish is a dreadful person, so vindictive. I shall be glad to see the last of them all. It is a horrible atmosphere. They regard me as a person whose wickedness is beyond conception or belief, a thief and a robber, responsible for my aunt's death, and for goodness knows what else. A curious experience to pass through," she added, with a slightly bitter smile, "especially for a harmless, unnecessary person like myself, who neither wished to come among them, nor, having come, wished to punish them."

"Punish them; it's what they deserve! You're passing through strange experiences, my dear, but you

may rely on me and my husband remaining your fast friends, and I hope you will believe that it would have been just the same had you been left without a penny."

"Indeed, I do believe it," replied Alice. With sudden demonstrative gesture she bent forward and kissed her new friend. And that kiss and the bright drops that hallowed it bound the impulsive, warm-hearted, little woman to Alice Harman with hooks of steel.

"Now come and see my baby. She is just ten months, a perfect darling. I am sure you like babies: I see it in your eyes."

If there had been any doubt of it it was banished by the sight of the beautiful rosy child in the girl's arm. Her face became positively glorified, and she seemed loth to put her down.

"I foresee you are going to be great friends, and it is not everybody Toddlers admits to her full confidence with such startling rapidity. Now come and see my brother. He can't do more as yet, poor chap, than hobble across the floor, though he talks of going back to Blenkenfoot every day. Says the lambs need him. It is a great stock place, my dear, and Jack is devoted to his flocks and herds; looks after them in the regular patriarchal fashion. Some day I hope you will see his home with me."

So talking she brought her to the drawing-room, where the big honest fellow, a little ashamed of his crutch perhaps, came forward to greet her. The circumstances were such as to call up all Alice Harman's latent womanly sympathy, and there was no doubt about the cordiality of her greeting. Mrs. King looked on delightedly, and after a time had no qualms about leaving them together. Then, however, conversation did not seem to flourish quite so successfully; indeed, an odd silence immediately fell on them both.

"You've had a trying time lately," said Jack, fully conscious of the difficulties of the situation, but doing his best in his clumsy honest way to overcome them.

"Of course, my sister has told me something about it. You look as if you needed a long rest."

Alice was silent a moment, looking round the warm, cosy family room with a feeling of envy. This was a real home, and somehow it seemed to bring home to her a quick and keen realisation of her own forlorn condition.

"For the last five years," she said, a trifle unsteadily, "I seem to have been having trying times. I suppose it is the lot of some."

"Was Miss Dempster your only relative?"

"I have some distant ones in Ireland, whom I have never seen, and don't expect to see," she answered. "I hope you are getting better, Mr. Traquair? It was splendid of you to do that, but just what I should have expected."

Now this candidly expressed opinion appeared to disconcert Jack Traquair a good deal. He positively blushed to the roots of his hair.

"Oh, Lucy has been making a mountain out of nothing. One couldn't exactly stand by and see the kiddies run down. I had a letter from our two rascals this morning. They are a little home-sick as usual when they have gone back to school. They did not forget to send their love to you."

But though Jack delivered the substance of the message, he did not give it in the refreshing form in which he had received it.

"How sweet of them to remember me! It must be very hard for Mrs. King to have them away like that! I thought Edinburgh was so splendid for schools it would not have been necessary."

"Oh, it's the little chap's health," replied Traquair quickly; "the east winds of Edinburgh are too much for him, and the other has to go to keep him company. But I assure you, they are quite happy, and manage generally to have a good time."

"I daresay," replied Alice, and they were silent again.

"I hope you are going to remain in Edinburgh, Miss Harman?" said Jack, a trifle nervously, yet unable to keep off the subject of her plans.

Her face seemed to draw him like a magnet. He was amazed at the strength of feelings which their short acquaintance did not justify.

"I am uncertain; I have really no home," she replied quickly. "You can't understand what kind of a forlorn feeling that gives one."

"I think I can," he answered gently. "But now, at least, you will have opportunities to make one."

"Do you think so? I don't agree. I have money certainly, but I have thought sometimes that those who have money have the least happiness in this world."

"It helps to gild some of the ills of life, though," he said simply. "I could be doing with a little more of it myself."

Alice laughed.

"Your tone belies your words. I don't believe you care for money at all, Mr. Traquair. Indeed, I am sure of it."

"It can buy a lot," he answered, with a single touch of bitterness.

"Perhaps, but there are some things it cannot buy," she answered.

He would have liked to ask what they were, but the door opened, and their brief colloquy was at an end. But it was only the beginning of many others. Theirs was a friendship, if the name may be used to describe a relationship open to doubt, which made strides by leaps and bounds. At the end of another week, when Jack Traquair went back to his lonely habitation among the Lanark hills, he was at once a happier and a more miserable man.

CHAPTER XXI.

JUSTICE WINS THE DAY

EDINBURGH has never been behindhand in the matter of *causes célèbres*. From time to time her legal and social circles have been strung to the highest degree of excitement and speculation by the dramatic and historic dramas unfolded and fought to a finish in her old Law Courts. There must be some still living who can call to remembrance the great case of Ruthven and others *versus* Harman, which created such a flutter in the city, and indeed through the whole kingdom, and even beyond it, partly because one of the parties involved was a young and beautiful woman, but chiefly because it led to a still greater and more tragic drama which held the waiting world breathless while the issues of life and death hung in the balance.

It is not my intention to describe in minute detail the whole legal proceedings of the case in which the Ruthvens, supported by the cleverest counsel of the day, and evidently in possession of unlimited means to prosecute to the bitter end, sought to recover the fortune of which they had been cheated.

From the time when the matter was first hinted at until it was made public in the newspapers there was a great deal of speculation regarding the issue. Public opinion naturally went with the defendant, to whom this extraordinary and unlooked-for publicity was a most painful experience. Indeed it is possible that, but for the intervention and support of the friends she had

already made in Edinburgh, she would have abandoned the defence, and left the Ruthvens to the enjoyment of their ill-gotten gains. But these friends (they were but a handful, it is true, but staunch and courageous) supported her right through, and helped doubtless to bring the case to its triumphant conclusion.

On the day on which the decision was expected to be given, Alice Hargnan, who had been the guest of the Marshall Kings during the whole period of the trial, came downstairs looking rather pale and worn, dressed for the visit to Parliament Square, which had now become a daily event. These trying months had aged her considerably, and added to her dignity without detracting from her charm. She had made a profound impression in Court on the day of the searching examination regarding the state of her aunt's mind during the period of her illness and before it, but she had come through the ordeal bravely.

It was impossible to confuse or shake her statements, which never varied. She said simply that, so far as her judgment served her, Miss Dempster was in full possession of her faculties during the weeks of their close intercourse, and that though she had never, even in remote terms, alluded to the disposition of her affairs, or dropped any hint to Alice as to her intentions, yet her mind was perfectly clear, and that up to the day of her seizure she was undoubtedly as able to transact business as any one present.

Ruthven's clever counsel did his best, even while secretly sympathising with her, to catch her up and find some weak spot in her defence. But he did not succeed; and it was generally believed that after that day's examination there was little hope for the Ruthvens.

They had managed to build up a pretty strong case, and it is possible that had they been less well known in Edinburgh, or more respected, they might have fared better. It was generally believed that old Ruthven

was playing his last card. But in this they were all mistaken.

• They behaved with great moderation, and in all their evidence there was a carefully studied desire to avoid all charge of animosity or vindictiveness. They tried to appear as just men balked of their rights, to which they believed themselves legally entitled.

Old Ruthven was too astute a man, and had too much experience of human nature, to appear otherwise. He knew that the public, and even great legal luminaries, who are, after all, only units of that public, are largely influenced by their feelings.

It was an interesting and exciting case, which provided earnest food for conversation and speculation, and it had come to an end. That day would witness the counsels' summing up and the verdict.

A trying day for Alice Harman undoubtedly—small wonder that she was pale and worn. Little did she dream that this would be by no means her first acquaintance with Law Courts.

Traquair stood in the hall below waiting for his sister to come down, and the carriage was at the door. It was once more November, so long had it taken to get all the preparations for the case ready. Traquair, therefore, had ample leisure. Alice ~~was~~ he had become very friendly, and she at least appeared quite unconscious that there was anything warmer than friendship in Traquair's attitude towards her.

• "You look tired," he said solicitously. "This will see the last of it. But do you think you should go to-day? It will be an ordeal, and though everybody seems to think the verdict a foregone conclusion, still, perhaps, you should not overdo it."

• She smiled slightly as she bent her head to fasten her gloves.

• "I am getting so used to it that to-morrow, like Othello, I shall wonder what to do ~~my~~ occupation gone

‘ He shrugged his shoulders. ’

“ A happy relief to us all,” he answered significantly, and at that moment his sister appeared and they left the house.

They reached the Court to find it more crowded than on any of the previous days. The legal profession was, of course, largely represented, and counsel’s summing up was eagerly waited for. From the beginning of his speech, which lasted three hours, the result was a foregone conclusion, and no one was surprised to find a unanimous verdict in favour of the defendant. She scarcely looked elated as the crowd broke up, and she found herself surrounded by a little crowd of congratulatory friends. Through the Kings she had become acquainted with a number of Edinburgh people moving in the best social set, and she had interested them all. While she was answering to the best of her ability, but with evident emotion, a strange gentleman joined the little circle and approached her with extended hand. His face seemed perfectly familiar, and in a flash she remembered her travelling companion, from Carlisle to Blenkenfoot, the elderly gentleman who had taken so much care of himself on the journey. He looked different and much more dignified now, and Alice did not fail to notice that a little hush of respect seemed to fall on those present as he advanced.

“ I came to offer my congratulations, Miss Harman,” he said, in a deep, rather gruff, voice. “ Probably you have forgotten me. I only looked in to-day accidentally, and recognised you at once.”

“ I remember you very well, sir, and I thank you sincerely,” replied Alice, with a ready smile. “ May I know to whom I have to acknowledge this kindness?”

“ Oh, it is of no consequence,” he answered, and with a kindly nod disappeared.

“ The Lord Justice-Clerk,” whispered Mrs. King, with a satisfied look on her face. “ You may congratu-

late yourself on having interested him. He is a splendid friend to have."

She spoke only casually, little dreaming how her words were to be verified in days to come.

While Alice departed, accompanied by her rejoicing friends, the condition of those who had been defeated was pitiable in the extreme. They had staked their all and much that did not belong to them on this one hazard, and had lost. Old Rossland, kept at home with an attack of gout, was, happily for them, not in Court when the decision was given, but he had to be faced and pacified somehow, and the question was how? They left Parliament Square in a closed cab, and drove down to Ruthven's house in St. Andrew Street. They did not speak a word the whole way. But when they got within the house, and the door was shut, the flood-gates of their wrath was opened.

Curiously it was now Ruthven the younger who was the most vindictive. He would never forgive Alice Harman for the slight she had put on his professional skill, not saying much but that sufficient to tell. She had not embroidered the truth, but he felt that he stood branded to the world as one who used his professional opportunities for self-gain; and all had been quietly done without a hint or suggestion of anything more criminal. It had been a clear case of truth being stronger and more potent than any trumped-up story. But what enraged them most, was that their own moderation and exceeding carefulness, not to appear to cast any more serious imputation than that of undue influence on Miss Harman, had given them so poor a return.

"We made a mistake, Pat!" said the old man grimly. "We were too frightened to speak even that we knew. If only we had another chance."

"We must make it," said Pat doggedly. "I tell you, I'm not done with madam yet. You look as if you had gotten your quietus, dad, but I'm like the war-horse whetted for battle. I hope to give Alice Harman many

a bad quarter of an hour yet to pay her out for these ghastly days. She's as good as ruined us both, but perhaps it'll be our turn next."

"What can we do, Pat? I don't feel at this moment as if I could lift my head. The time's come, I think, when that little dose we've so often spoken of would be useful. Ugh, I'm sick of the whole business of living. The game's not worth the candle."

"Well, you see you've had your innings. I'm the chief sufferer here, and I tell you I'm not going to stand by tamely and submit. She shall pay, if not in coin, then in something else."

But old Ruthven looked doubtful, not even feebly interested. The tide of popular and professional feeling, obviously so strongly against him, had discouraged him. He felt as if it were a tide impossible to breast.

"How about Rossland?" he asked grimly. "He's the next one to be squared."

"We can't square him, guv.; we can only defy him, and let him do his worst. After all it was merely a spec. on his part. The old rascal didn't go into it out of love for yours truly, but because he expected his little haul. He must take the bad with the good. I'm not going to bother my head about him."

But while he spoke with apparent bravado, his spirit really quailed at the thought of Daddy Rossland's wrath, when he should learn the result of the day. For a moment he wondered whether he should confess to his father the depth of his entanglement with the Rosslands, but reflecting that nothing would be gained by it, especially as the old man was evidently in the last stages of despondency, he decided to hold his tongue.

"We must lay our brains together, guv.," he said, with an attempt at cheerfulness. "And after all they can't fake the breeks off a Highlandman."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FRESH PLOT

RUTHVEN reached his own house at St. Patrick Square that evening to find Meikle and Mrs. Dalgleish waiting for him. He was by no means displeased to see them, and said so as he gave them good-evening. They were now out of service, and Dalgleish was living with her married sister in the Causewayside, prior to her marriage with Meikle, which they had come to the conclusion would really be a wise step. They had only waited the issue of the case in the hope that they would obtain a little more money to enable them to settle down comfortably in a little inn on the Dalkeith Road, regarding which Meikle had entered into negotiation. Of course the result of the trial had been a blank disappointment to them, for the Ruthvens had never ceased to buoy them up with hopes of a reverse judgment.

He saw by their faces how deeply they were disappointed, and, metaphorically speaking, decided to take the bull by the horns. He wished, for very strong private reasons, to retain their goodwill. Their co-operation would be absolutely necessary for the further scheme which was already taking shape in his mind.

"Well, it's a blue look-out, isn't it?" he said, with a grimace. "I was wondering when we should meet. I suppose you were in Court to-day? I didn't see you."

"We was there right enough," said Meikle, in his thin, wiry voice. "An' a mighty sell it was for us I can tell ye."

"There isn't much justice in the world, in spite of all their tall talk," said Ruthven carelessly. "Of course, if you have been following the proceedings intelligently you could easily see how the wind was blowing from the beginning. She's got a lot of big folk at her back, all with their own axes to grind. That tells in Edinburgh—grand friends, I mean—more than any place else in the world."

"Ay, it's fu' o' stinkin' pride," remarked Dalgleish, bringing her lips together with a snap like a rat-trap. "She stood up thonder as impident as ye like. A brazen hizzie, as I said to Meikle. If they'd seen as muckle o' her as I saw at George Square they'd tell a different story maybe."

"Ay, if only they could have been behind the scenes with us, eh, Mrs. Dalgleish?" said Ruthven suggestively.

Dalgleish nodded appreciatively.

"Ay, if they had; but, mair's the peety, we canna tell a' we saw."

"But the question arises whether we are justified in withholding what we do know," he said persuasively. "Now, all this week I've been troubled in my conscience. I mean because I've spared her."

"Is't ower late no?" asked Dalgleish, sitting forward eagerly, her features beginning to work convulsively. Meikle, certainly not less eager, sat forward too, his ferret-like eyes glowing with a strange fire.

"Well, not exactly; we'll have to think everything over, Mrs. Dalgleish. My father is naturally very much upset. He has lost thousands in this case, and the cost will be tremendous. In fact, he'll be ruined practically. Of course, I tell you this in strict confidence, because I know I can trust you as friends, and because we are fellow-sufferers through that woman's vile plotting."

Both Meikle and Mrs. Dalgleish nodded in silent acknowledgment of this appreciation.

"But in a day or two, perhaps to-morrow, he'll be

himself again," continued the doctor, "and then we must consult together. She ought not to be let off; do you think she should?"

"Certainly no'. If I had my way I'd like to see her gang back the beggar's road she cam'," said Dalgleish, almost savagely. "An' if she could be punished for her ongauns I for wan wad like to see it."

"We must consider everything," said Ruthven, in a smooth, significant voice. "Have you any news of George Square, by-the-bye? Is she living there?"

"No' the noo; she's at Heriot Row with the King folk," said Dalgleish. "But Jervis has been back to see Teen. She's the king o' the cadgers noo, if ye like. It shows what Miss Harman is that she could tak' up wi' riff-raff like her."

Ruthven nodded.

"And is the girl Caldwell living in that big house alone?"

"Oh, no; there's twa new servants and a wummin frae the Kings' hoose, forby some auld nurse, I believe; but she's expectit hame the day."

"It's wonderful how you manage to know everything," Mrs. Dalgleish.

"If ye dinna keep your een an' your ears open as ye gang by ye miss a heap that micht be for your guid," observed Dalgleish wisely.

"But it's better to keep your mooth shut, Rebecca," put in Meikle wisely.

"Teen? no' to do ony mair scopin' or dustin'; she's gaun to be, sin maid to Miss Harman, an' learn the hairdressin' an' the dressmakin'," observed Dalgleish, with unutterable scorn. "I'd like to see her; a bonnie pair they'll be, mistress and maid."

"Looks as if there was some guilty secret between them, doesn't it?" asked Ruthven casually. "Miss Harman is a lady in spite of all that's come and gone, and it's not natural that she should tak' up with riff-raff like Caldwell, as you say."

Dalglish nodded. The words were as sweet morsels in her mouth; she was in her worst and most dangerous mood.

Ruthven walked to the door and opened it to see whether Miss Macdonald should be indulging her curiosity outside. Dishonest and treacherous himself, he suspected everybody, but his housekeeper was a decent woman who knew her place and kept it. She was not particularly fond of her master, but it was an easy place and the wages good. And he did not meddle unduly with her management of the house.

"You could swear, couldn't you, to the events of that night, the night before Miss Dempster's death, Mrs. Dalglish?"

"Sweir, ay, if need be, but they need nae sweirin', they were plain enough to onybody's een," she said quickly.

"Though I did not say so quite plainly at the time, not wishing to be mixed up in such a ghastly affair, there were circumstances attending Miss Dempster's last illness I could not understand, and which need explanation. The question is whether we should allow the matter to drop, or bring her to just punishment, or at least to examination. That would break her haughty spirit, eh?"

"It wad be nae mair nor she deserves," said Dalglish blappishly. "But could onything be dune noo, Miss Dempster bein' deid an' buried?"

"Oh, yes, there have been cases where it was necessary to take up the dead again to discover whether they met their death by natural causes."

Meikle, a trifle more scrupulous than his future wife, shivered a little and looked round fearfully. It was a gruesome subject to discuss in cold blood. He half wished he had not been mixed up with it.

"I see," observed Dalglish, with a nod. "If you an' me were to tell a' we kent, there wad be mair heard o' Miss Dempster's death."

"Certainly, but what we have to consider is whether it would be to our interest. It can't benefit the poor old lady now."

"No, an' it's no' décent to disturb her even in her grave," said Meikle quickly. "Wad it be likely to mak' ony difference to the money?"

"It would make all the difference if anything could be proved against her," said the doctor. "But I think we need not speculate any further on the matter until I've got my father's views. He'll be all right to-morrow, I don't doubt. When I've consulted with him you'll hear from me. Where are you to be found?"

"I'm at the Causewayside, No. 17; that'll find Meikle, too; he's no' far off," said Dalgleish.

"I suppose you're not going to marry just yet?"

"As soon as the Gilmerton lease's signed," said Dalgleish, who was spokeswoman on every occasion; "we're needin' to see Maister Ruthven aboot it. There's a clause in't aboot sub-lettin' we canna agree till. It's no' common sense that we should hae nae power to sub-let it if we dinna get on."

"It doesn't seem to be; but my father will be able to advise you regarding it. Don't do anything in a hurry. Everything comes to those that can wait, mind that."

There was a low tap at the door, and Miss Macdonald looked in.

"Miss Rossland, sir, she's sittin' in the passage, an' there's nae place to put her."

Ruthven nodded, and, opening the door, indicated to the couple that they had better go. He accompanied them himself to the door, where he shook hands ostentatiously with them both, telling them to call again soon, and expressing the hope that they would soon be better, which puzzled them very much.

"What could he mean?" asked Meikle, as they crossed by the railings of the Square.

"Gomeril, he was wantin' to let on to the lassie that we was patients. That's business, the same kind o'

business you an' me's gaun into at Gilmerton," she said, in a voice of good-natured scorn, whereat Meikle laughed so much that she took him by the arm, and enjoined him to behave himself like a Christian in the street.

The moment the street door closed Ruthven turned with a look of slight apprehension to Miss Rossland. He guessed her errand to be one of serious import. But he did not put any question until they were safely in the sitting-room.

"I suppose you've heard?" he said at once.

"Oh, yes. Bob was in Court all day, and took a cab out the moment it was all over. What's going to be done now, Pat?"

"Daddy in a bad way, I suppose?" he said, with assumed carelessness.

"He's frightful. I really don't know what'll be the upshot of it. It's making me ill, all this business, Pat, and I want to know what you're going to do now."

"I'll have to find that out first, lass," he said, with an uneasy laugh. "I guessed the old man would cut up. My guv'nor seems to be on his last legs over it. But he'll come to in a day or two. Well, Jess, there's nothing to be done. As I informed my guv. to-day, not very politely, perhaps, but with considerable accuracy, they can't take the breeks off a Highlandman."

"But you don't know my father, Pat, how relentless he can be. He has done things which kept me from sleeping at nights to get back his money. And he always gets it back. What surprises me is that he ever embarked in this. I'm only an ignorant girl, of course, but it seemed to me from the first that there was no chance."

"The wisdom of the serpent combined with the harmlessness of the dove. How did you arrive at this conclusion, Miss Oracle?"

"I saw her the first day," she replied calmly.

"Well, what's that got to do with it?"

"She's far above anything of that sort, Pat. Why, it was written on her face, and they all knew it too."

Patrick was silent a moment, arrested by the words, which presented a new point of view. If Jessie Rossland was right in her surmise, and a woman sometimes makes up in intuition what she lacks in actual reasoning, the look-out for the future was black indeed. For the scheme he had in view was a tremendous one, only to be undertaken with chances of assured success.

"Did Daddy send you here to-day, Jess?"

"No, but I was glad to get out of the house. I shouldn't be surprised if he took a fit of some kind, he's in such a state."

"A nice, gentle fit at the present moment would be a godsend, Jess. It would give us all time to turn round," he observed. "Well, to show you how little I fear Daddy's wrath, directed against innocent heads, I don't doubt, I'll go out with you to Corstorphine, and beard the old lion in his den."

CHAPTER XXIII

SMOOTHING THEM DOWN

WHEN Ruthven and Jess got outside the evening was so temptingly beautiful that Ruthven suggested they should walk out to Corsorphine.

"Been shut up for the best part of two weeks in that beastly stuffy court, and I'm needing a breath of fresh air, Jess. You don't mind?"

"No; I'd like it, and there's no hurry. Dad doesn't know where I am."

The way was very familiar to them, and, though the beauty of the route might have arrested them, they were too full of their own affairs to notice it. Once they got clear of the environs of the city Ruthven's attitude and manner became more lover-like. He realised the absolute necessity of trying to keep the goodwill of the Rosslands, until, as he expressed it, he had time to turn round. He knew that Jessie had great power over the old man, and upon her, in the meantime, he must rely.

It was not his policy, however, to make any suggestion to her regarding the reopening of the case. She was rather of a gentle, sensitive nature, and would shrink with horror from the idea of being mixed up with such a tragedy. No, it was a matter to be discussed with men, or with women of the Dalgleish type, who had few bowels of compassion. So he confined himself in Jessie's company to private and personal matters regarding their own future. And that subject was one of such engrossing interest to the girl that the time

seemed to fly on wings of gold and distance seemed as nothing.

They were discussing the prospects emigration to another country might offer persons in their position when they came to the little village, at that time entirely detached from Edinburgh, and quite individual and apart in its life and interests. Now it has been absorbed by the spreading city, of which it has become merely a suburb.

Daddy Rossland was one of the first to build on a slope of Corstorphine Hill, and, being a far-seeing and speculative person, had invested in a good bit of land, confident that it would prove a rich mine for development in a few years' time, when the craze for homes out of town would seize the well-to-do. The little forest of villas, which now dots the hill and the plain, has long since proved the wisdom and foresight of Daddy Rossland, though the land has long since passed out of the hands of him and his heirs.

He had built himself a very pretty house, half-cottage, half-villa type. It stood in ample grounds with some fine old trees in front, and was the picture of that retired solitude which is the dream of so many city workers.

The younger members of the family, however, disliked it intensely. It was dull and gloomy; they missed the constant stir, the coming and going of the less salubrious, but more exciting, West Bow, and Jess, at least, would have gone back thankfully. Even the knowledge that they had advanced in the degrees of gentility by separating home from trade did not reconcile her to the long, gloomy, unoccupied days in the country.

"It's a sweet spot this. 'Pon my word, Daddy ought to be a contented man instead of a cantankerous one, Jess, living in such a place," observed Ruthven as they reached the white gate of the villa.

"I hate it like poison," she answered, without a

moment's hesitation. "If I thought I should have to live all my life here with Daddy and Bob I'd finish myself, Pat."

She spoke in the unthinking way of youth, little dreaming that in these passionate but carelessly uttered words she foretold her own destiny. She felt, secretly elated at having been able to bring Ruthven back with her. Her father's language when the result of the day's proceedings was brought to him was not edifying nor flattering to the Ruthvens.

He had, indeed, vowed all sorts of vengeance on them for having robbed him of so much. His state of health had prevented him attending the sittings of the Court, but he had eagerly followed the whole case as it was fully reported in the newspapers, and had drawn his own conclusions therefrom. And they were not favourable to the pursuers.

He was confined to a sofa in the dining-room, and the evening meal was on the table when Ruthven entered the room. Jessie had prudently escaped upstairs without seeing her father, leaving her lover to make his own explanations.

Daddy Rosslund looked intensely surprised to behold him, and even secretly admired his courage. Bob, a tall youth of the handsome florid type, engaged in a stockbroker's office, as being more respectable than the second-hand business, elevated his brows also, in supreme astonishment. As it happened, Bob and Ruthven did not pull very well together, and Bob had enjoyed hearing his father's plain speech regarding the Ruthvens, and had, as his sister expressed it, egged him on.

"Well?" said Ruthven, with a curious little nod. "Didn't expect to see me, I suppose. We're beaten this time, but we're not done yet."

"Done!" fumed Rosslund, giving the paper a significant touch with his whole foot. "After that I wonder you care to be seen in the streets. You and the old man got some precious rough handling."

"Oh, it's all in the day's work," replied Ruthven easily. "Words are cheap and break no bones. They'll be forgotten to-morrow when somebody else's turn comes on. I'm sorry though, more sorry than I can say, so is father. He's too much upset to come as far, but I have his authority for saying that we'll be able to square up one day soon, if you'll only give us a little time."

Now these words surprised Rossland more and more. He had expected nothing but abject cowardice on the part of the Ruthvens, and was at his wits' end regarding the money he had in a weak moment promised to pay. But Ruthven did not speak nor carry himself like a defeated man, but rather like one who had a further card to play. Now Daddy Rossland loved intrigue, he had had a great deal of experience of the sordid side of human nature and life, and had a secret admiration even for a rogue who will neither own himself rogue nor acknowledge that he is beaten. His harsh face relaxed a bit, and he invited Ruthven to sit down and eat with them. At the moment Jessie entered the room. Rossland was not aware that she had been to Edinburgh; he never interfered with her movements in any way.

"Seen Ruthven, Jessie?" he said, noticing that they did not shake hands.

"Yes, father," she answered. "What are you going to drink? Tea or coffee, or do you want some whisky?"

"Don't tempt me, lass. Ruthven knows that whisky is poison to a man with gout. Now, if your boasted skill was worth a cent, you'd tell me why I am chained up here with a gouty toe, not having tasted whisky for a month."

"It's the sins of the fathers, Daddy," observed Ruthven lightly. "I'll send you out something that'll get you a night's sleep anyhow. I'm really sorry you weren't able to come into the Court, I can assure you. You'd have helped to protest against the absence of fairplay."

"You think it was one-sided then?"

"Don't I just? I tell you she had 'em all bought up, and what she couldn't get at herself these Marshall Kings brought in in her favour. I think it's positively disgraceful to see a public man like King using the influence of his position in such jobbery."

"What do they get out of it, eh?" asked Daddy musingly. "Got any marriageable sons they can palm off on the girl?"

"No," said Ruthven. "They're quite young people, but, all the same, they've got their axe to grind, too."

"As we all have," observed Rossland sardonically.

"Well, of course, but we don't pretend anything else. They are pillars in kirks and heaven knows all what. They say King will be the head and front in the lay department of this Disruption business when it comes off. Ugh, I'm sick of their whining ways. I want a chat and a smoke with you, Daddy, after supper, if you please."

Rossland, who had spent two long dull weeks in retirement, was by no means averse to hearing something from the outside world, and, after supper, carried Ruthven off to his den, from which, for the time being, both his son and daughter were excluded.

Ruthven made him comfortable in a big easy-chair, closed the door, and sat down in front of him, the picture of earnest regret. He had carefully mapped out his rôle of conciliation and entreaty, and had decided to take Rossland into his full confidence. He knew his man pretty well. There was just sufficient spice of the unlawful and adventurous in the scheme to appeal to the old man, who in his youth had been one of the wildest youths about town.

"Now look here, Daddy, doesn't my coming out here without a moment's delay prove that I'm on the square, that we both are?" he began, as he filled his pipe from the old man's pouch, without, however, lighting it.

"Well," grunted Rossland, "I own I didn't expect

you, but what about my money? Added to what's gone before, it's a tidy sum, Ruthven, and it's got to be refunded somehow."

"You don't think we've let you in deliberately this time now?" he said, in an aggrieved voice. "If we hadn't thought we'd a strong case, do you think we'd have taken the risks? I tell you it's not going to do me any good, professionally. Litigation never does. It was mainly on the governor's account I let the thing go on. It's mighty rough on him, you'll own. For he hasn't had a penny for work done for over twenty years."

"The more fool he; but I take that with a grain of salt, Pat. Your father doesn't seem to me to be built that way."

"Oh, he expected to get it all back, of course, and I the same, but let's get to the heart of the whole matter. Now, I want to know whether I can trust you, Daddy. I must go the whole hog or nothing, and it's a very dangerous business. Will you promise to keep it dark?"

"I like to hear you, sonny, to me that holds half the secrets of Edinburgh in my hands. I could make them sit up, I could. Well, what is it?"

"Well, we're not done with this Harman girl yet. There was a lot of queer things happened these weeks the old girl was ill in George Square. The gov. and I agreed that we'd best keep it dark, for various reasons, and if the money had come our way, we would have kept it dark, but now the necessity doesn't exist, see?"

"What sort of things?" asked the old man, with an eagerness which left Ruthven in no doubt interest.

He gave a cautious look round, and then leaned forward.

"I believe and could prove that the old lady did not die a natural death, but was poisoned," he said, in a low voice.

"You don't say so. Who did it? Not that girl who

locks the picture of innocence, if you're to believe what the newspapers say about her?"

"Oh, that's all bunkum," said Ruthven lightly. "I saw—well, what I saw; and I've got corroborative evidence, too. The old girl's confidential servants, the butler and her own maid, saw a lot. I had her put up to watch Miss Harman a whole night, and the evidence of our eyes was indisputable."

"But what's the good now?" asked Rossland shrewdly. "She's dead and buried, and the young one has got a tight hold of the money. Why, man, you're cheated all round."

"Not so fast, Daddy; there are ways and means, and if it's left to me and to my guy, when he comes round we'll make such a hue and cry in Edinburgh as has never been seen."

"Would it benefit you?"

"In the long run, of course. Don't you see the whole thing as plain as a pikestaff? If such a thing could be proven against her she couldn't get the money, and it would revert, as it ought, where Miss Dempster always intended it should revert. Depend upon it, she will act in her sound judgment when she made that will. If you'd known her as we did and seen the change that girl wrought in a few weeks' time you'd agree with me."

"It sounds interesting, but if any more money is wanted, Pat, you'll need to try somebody else. I'm finished with the whole business."

"No money will be asked or needed, man; it'll be a Crown prosecution. Don't you see, there isn't even a relative to be interested? All I want is that you'll wait a little till things develop, and you'll have your money back, with rich interest, or at least," he added, with a short laugh, "it won't go out of the family after I'm married to Jessie."

With all his sordid experience Rossland was somewhat easily taken in, and Ruthven had a guileful way.

By the time he left the house the old man had not only promised to wait, but to help if need be in every possible way.

Greatly relieved, and congratulating himself heartily on his own cleverness, Ruthven went straight from Corstorphine to his father's house. He found him sitting the picture of misery and despair by his desolate hearth, thinking that even his own son had deserted him.

"Cheer up, guv.; don't look as if the end of all things had come."

"But it has," he answered, with a groan. "Ross-land! I'm ill when I think of him."

"He's all right, bless you; Daddy and I are the best of friends. I've just been out to him at Corstorphine, and had it out with him, and he's willing to wait indefinitely and to help us in the next stage of this interesting journey," said Patrick airily.

His father stared at him astounded, and he nodded gaily.

"Fact, guv., you didn't know you had such a genius for a son, did you? But you see when I saw you

Over I realised that it was time to wake myself. I've been thinking over things, as I walked in. You'll give up this house, keep one room for what business you have, and come and live with me. It'll lessen expense, and, besides, we'll need to be pretty much together if the little scheme I've worked out is going to come to any good."

So saying, he drew his chair closer to his father's and began to talk. And they sat discussing their plans until midnight had struck and silence descended upon the sleeping city.

CHAPTER XXIV

TAKING UP THE THREADS

"**B**UT, my dear, I am seriously concerned. You cannot possibly go on living in that great house alone. I didn't say anything before; but, now everything's settled, I must."

It was Mrs. King who spoke, on the evening of the Court's decision, as she lingered a moment in the chamber of her guest to discuss the events of the day.

"Why not?" asked Alice, with the calm, slight smile which many found disconcerting. "I have been used with loneliness since my father died; and Dr. Guthrie has promised me plenty of occupation."

"Oh, that's all right. I'm not afraid of your days, you will fill them up all right; but it is your position I am thinking of. A young and attractive woman—you need not shake your head, my dear; others will tell you the same story; indeed, they've often done so already, I am sure. A young, attractive and rich woman living all alone in that great gloomy house; it is not the thing at all. Why, Edinburgh society will be scandalised."

"But I'm not in Edinburgh society, dear Mrs. King," said Alice provokingly.

"Not yet, but you will be, I hope. With your looks, your means, and your personality, especially the last-mentioned, my dear, you will be a somebody. But we must take great care of you. There are fortune-hunters ever here, Alice."

"Yes, but I think I am level-headed enough to be able to avoid them."

"That may be, but we don't forget the Irish strain in you. I've seen more than one spark of it in the last fortnight. But, anyhow, why will you persist in going back to-morrow? Is there any need for such haste?"

"I think so. The servants are alone. There is a great deal needing to be done in the house, and, in fact, Mrs. King, I am eager to take up my life as I mean to live it."

"Tom still thinks you should let the house and go away for six months until the sensation and talk die down."

"I don't mind it in the least. Why should I? I know so few, and these," she added affectionately, "happily for me, will not change."

"Certainly not; but if you really believe in my friendship, my dear, you will permit me to advise you at least a little. You can't live at George Square alone. We must find you a chaperon of some kind."

"You might call her by that name, dear Mrs. King, but her duties would be microscopic."

"That might be, but she would be there all the same, and make the position what it ought to be."

"Is this real anxiety on my account, or merely a concession to the conventions?"

"A little of both. It is necessary to pay some attention to conventions, for, however much we may deride them, some sort of code is necessary to keep the thing within bounds. We don't doubt for a moment that you could live a perfectly inoffensive and possibly happy enough life alone, but it would be bad for you. In the first place, you would have too much time to brood, and you might become, if not eccentric at least too individual. It would spoil you. Do I make myself clear?"

"Oh, quite; and to please you, I am quite willing to have a nice, comfortable tabby round all the time," she

said, with a mischievous smile, which, however, faded as suddenly as it came, leaving a somewhat pathetic line. "I really have a great many plans; one of them is to try and find girls like myself not well off, who need a rest, and who would be glad and thankful to come for a few weeks to bear me company. I have spoken about it to Dr. Guthrie, and he assures me they will not be difficult to find. Then I would try and find some lonely old maiden lady of very small means; he assures me there are plenty such, in Edinburgh, too—women of good family who live on what would seem incredible to us, and who keep up a surprising and pathetic dignity upon it. If I could persuade some such one to come and live with me permanently, giving her certain duties and a fixed salary, we might both benefit. I intend to be very busy all the winter in Dr. Guthrie's service."

Mrs. King did not reply for a moment, too much touched, indeed, to speak. When she did so her voice was very low and soft.

"It is beautiful of you, Alice, but I confess to a tiny bit of disappointment. I hope I am charitable, and I try to help people, but I do grudge you giving yourself up wholly to this kind of thing. It is more for women who have lived their life and proved the vanity of worldly things. You ought to have the best time of your life among us, after your mourning is over. You will find every door open to you, and ought to enjoy yourself."

"There are often times when I think my life is over, Mrs. King. Some day I will tell you my whole story, then you will understand."

"Well, maybe, but at four-and-twenty and with such a face I refuse to believe it, my dear. It is not common sense," asserted her friend stoutly. "Well, about this chaperon; I have one in my mind's eye at this moment, an elderly and very poor governess, who is past teaching, and is at present supporting herself on a pension of

twenty pounds raised for her by a few old pupils, myself among the number. Of course, we help her in other ways. She is very, very poor, but of so happy and sunshiny a nature, with a touch of shrewd humour, which would make you think her as happy as a queen. And in all the long years I have known her I have never once heard her complain.

"That is the woman for me, Mrs. King; and if you will take me to see her to-morrow morning, before I go back to George Square, we may come to some arrangement without delay."

Next morning, accordingly, the two walked down the steep hill to Stockbridge, where, in a very small room, rented from a decent working couple, they found Miss Cummings apparently engrossed by a bit of very fine embroidery. She was a small, bird-like person, very neat and dainty in her attire, though it was painfully shabby and threadbare. When she opened the door in answer to their knock, Mrs. King observed at once that she had been shedding tears quite recently.

"Good-morning, Miss Cummings," she said, giving her an affectionate kiss; "I have brought a young friend to see you, Miss Alice Harman, who has something very particular to say to you."

"To say to me! Very pleased, I am sure," she said, with a little smile, as she dropped one of her old-fashioned curtsies in acknowledgment of the introduction. "Won't you sit down? There are only two chairs, but I will sit on this little stool."

She whisked imaginary dust off the chairs with her handkerchief, and set them forward for her visitors, evidently both pleased and a little excited to welcome them.

"Cummie," observed Mrs. King severely, "you've been crying. Don't attempt to deny it, but tell me at once what is the matter. And don't mind Miss Harman. She is as truly your friend as I am."

Alice meanwhile was taking in the simple details of the meagre little room, her heart swelling with an im-

menage and understanding compassion. She, too, had known poverty, had proved the whole art of making one sixpence do the work of two, and she could appreciate to the full the proper and admirable pride that would seek to make the best of everything, and, above all, would hide its sorrow from the world. A glow of gratitude to God for having given her the power to help one so deserving brought a new and lovely light upon her sweet face.

"It is nothing, only some one disappoints me, that is all."

"Tell me about it, Cummie," said Mrs. King, leaning forward affectionately.

"Well, it is a little money matter too trifling to mention. I lent a little to one I thought deserving, and now it will never be paid, and I am in trouble about my rent. I owe three weeks now, and I don't know how I am to pay it. But there, the money will come from somewhere," she added brightly. "It always does. Don't look so solemn about it, dear Mrs. King, but tell me about my precious boys."

"Cummie, you would dare to lend money again! Listen, Alice; this good soul, though she has a little, is always trying to help others who are sometimes better off than she is herself, with the result as you see. What ought we to do with her? The only way is to take all her money, and dole it out in shillings, just sufficient to cover her needs."

"Tell her what we have come for," said Alice, with her eyes aglow.

Mrs. King did so as briefly and concisely as possible, and before Miss Cummings had time to reply Alice continued the tale.

"There wouldn't be much to do except to look after and keep in check a rather wilful young woman, so I hope you will come to please me, but chiefly to relieve Mrs. King's mind, she being assured I shall come to grief of some kind without you."

The little governess sat very still, with her hands folded on her lap, and never spoke a word.

Alice mistook her silence for hesitation.

"I will pay you well—fifty pounds a year—and other things we shall arrange as we go along, and if you are interested in poor people, as I am sure you must be, you will have your full share of that too, for Dr. Guthrie is going to give me work to do for him this winter. But, chiefly, I want you for companionship in the house, and I will do my best to make you happy. Mrs. King will tell you my faults."

"She has none, Cummie," put in Mrs. King hastily, "except an inordinate desire to be far too kind and good to everybody, so I hope you will go to please us all."

"It is the Lord's doing," murmured the little woman almost under her breath, "to have a home without anxiety, to be able once more to earn a little. Oh, are you sure it is real?" she said, almost piteously. "Only this morning I asked myself whether God had really forgotten me. It all seemed so dark. The shop that used to buy my embroideries has shut up, and I have not been able to find another; everything seemed against me. But are you sure that I am fitted for such a responsible post?"

"I have pledged myself that you are, Cummie," observed Mrs. King. "So you've got to bring back all your old disciplinary powers, and live up to the reputation I have given you."

Miss Cammings turned to Alice and clasped her hands.

"My dear, I thank you more than I can say. When you are old yourself, and careworn, though God forbid you should ever be the latter, but you would then know what you have done this day. I will come most thankfully, but I will not take all that money—indeed, it would be wrong, for I should not earn it. I will leave it all to you, and God bless you both for your kind

thought for an old woman who deserves to be forgotten."

"Old, indeed! What are your years, Cummie? You look just the same as you used to do when you taught me all I know in the old schoolroom at Clinton."

"I am fifty-seven," she answered, and her gaze wandered almost anxiously to the face of Alice, as if she feared that her years might be against her.

"When can you come, Miss Cummings?" asked Alice, almost abruptly. "I need you almost at once. Could you be ready this evening if I send a carriage for you at six o'clock?"

So it was arranged, and when they left the house Alice turned to her friend with a sober, quiet look on her face.

"Thank you for this and for all. At least, you have put me in the right way to begin with. Even I feel a generous glow at my heart, I who have done so little. What must you feel who live but to bless all you know?"

CHAPTER XXV

WHERE THE SHADOW LAY

Alice drove up to the house in George Square about four o'clock in the afternoon. A curious feeling was hers as she alighted before the familiar door. For it was now her home absolutely to do with as she willed. She was quite conscious of a feeling of peace and contentment at the thought. Strong in heart, there was no shrinking from a loneliness that would have appalled some women. She had been well tried in the school of life. Her welcome did not lack. At the open door stood Christina Caldwell, a neat trim figure in well-fitting black frock and short befrilled muslin apron, to distinguish her from the rest of the household. For Christina had received promotion for faithful service. She was now maid to Miss Harman, with a list of duties so light that she almost scorned while she loved them. It was wonderful what these months had done for the slum girl: all that was best in her nature called forth by humane treatment, her very face shone with the reflection of the glory within. But there were tears in her eyes as she ran to relieve her mistress of her cloak and hand-bag: to Christina even a few days' separation had seemed intolerable. Alice smiled upon her, holding out a kind hand, pleased once more to see that kindly face which would do so much to create for her an atmosphere of home.

"Well, Christina, here I am again, back for good this time."

"Yes, miss, that's what I've been sayin' to mysel' a' day," replied Christina fervently, as she stood aside to let her mistress pass. Three new servants, a capable middle-aged cook, a pleasant-faced housemaid and a demure-looking boy stood within to welcome her. She had a smile and a word for them all. They had one and all watched the case with transcending interest, all the more intense that their own future so largely depended on the issue. And a brief term of service with Miss Harman had created in them the desire to remain. Their evident pleasure at sight of her was very gratifying to Alice, and she looked round her with a sigh of contentment.

"It all looks very nice," she murmured involuntarily.

"It's clean, ma'am," observed cook critically. "I never saw anybody to work like Christina, and she has kept us a' at it."

The tone of her voice indicated that the best of relationships existed now between the members of the household.

"Well, I'm much obliged to you all for your kind interest, and I hope we will have a comfortable winter together," she said, as she passed into the little library and closed the door. For an overmastering tide of emotion rose within; it was almost a year since she had made her first arrival there, and how different the atmosphere! What strange and eventful happenings had set this year apart for ever in the calendar of memory! Nothing had been done to the house; for though it was needing renovation badly, Alice had a fine feeling that she would not disturb it yet awhile. It pleased her to believe that she who had gone away would wish it left for a time at least unchanged. The familiar room, where so many eventful things had happened, was exactly as she had left it: the high chair stood against the wall instead of before the fire, but it needed no swift flight of the imagination to fill it with the tall, thin, emaciated figure she remembered so well. She was

even conscious of a strange nearness to the unseen, until a low tap at the door disturbed her. It was Christina with her tea-tray.

"Come in and talk to me, Christina. How nice and home-like it all looks. And you are all pleased at what has happened?"

"Of course, but we never expected anything else. My, what an impudence they had. They canna feel very comfortable the day."

"They left the Court before the decision was given, and I've not seen them since, if you are speaking of Dr. Ruthven and his father?"

"It's them I mean. I saw him last nicht walking across the Meadows with a young lady. Da'gleish thinks he's gaun to be married, or was to hae been if he had got the money."

"Oh, have you seen Da'gleish lately?"

"No, ma'am, but Jervis has been here to see me twice. She's left her place at the Grange, an' she lodges in the same hoose as Da'gleish. It's her guid-sister in the Causewayside."

"I see. When was she here last?"

"Last nicht, Da'gleish an' Meikle's gaun to be married themsel's, ma'am," observed Christina, and a little ripple of merriment dimpled her bonnie face, and was so contagious that Alice herself could not forbear a smile.

"Really; so they took Miss Dempster's advice in earnest. You seem amused, Christina?"

"I'm like to kill mysel' when I think o' it," she answered, unable to steady her voice. "An' they're gaun to open a public in the Gilmerton Road. But what they'll dae noo," she added seriously, "I dinna ken."

"Oh; they have enouglh money for that purpose, and I should think Da'gleish would make a very thrifty landlady. But I'm sorry for Meikle."

"Ye needna be, ma'am. That's what gars me laugh."

Dalgleish thinks she'll be the maister: Meikle kens she winna. They'll maybe fecht like cat an' dowie for a while, syne Dalgleish she'll gie in, an' what wad I no gie to see it?"

Once more was Alice arrested by the shrewd observation of human nature and affairs that had from the outset distinguished the girl. But she thought it wise to change the subject.

"I have a lady coming to live with me permanently, as companion I mean; and I think I will give her my aunt's room. It's a very pleasant one, and it will be better for us all to have it occupied."

"Yes, ma'am, it's a' clean, but there's nae curtains on the bed. The ither dunity set's clean though; if ye like I'll put them up. When's she comin'?"

"To-night."

"Then I'd better light the fire. The press has never been opened, ma'am; nor the key found. It's the only place that hasna been turned out in the hoose."

"We'll see about it, Christina," replied Alice. "I know exactly what is in it, and it was all washed down in the last week of my aunt's illness. Miss Cummings will not want it I am sure. She has the chest of drawers and the wardrobe. We can get the carpenter to see about it one of these days."

But Christina still lingered with an odd look in her face. To her the cupboard was a haunted place, a thing of evil memory. She would have told why it was haunted for her, only that she feared to awaken disagreeable memories in the mind of her mistress.

"Oh, there's letters, ma'am," she said, suddenly diving into the pocket of her apron, where she had hidden two that had arrived in the interval. She looked round quickly remembering her manners, and, lifting a little salver from the chiffonier, presented them in the proper way. Alice smiled thereat, but as she recognised the handwriting of both her smile faded. For once more two letters came together from Colchester,

and one bore the stamp of the Indian mail. Christina withdrew, and her mistress sat down to go through them; a very light task, since both were very short. The first came from Mrs. O'Brien, and ran as follows:—

"DEAR GIRL,—You will be surprised at enclosed, which came under cover to me, begging me to forward it. Cicely Travers is home again, but when I asked Mrs. Fitzgerald about it she pursed up her lips, and told me I had better ask Cicely herself. That I won't do. Meanwhile she is laying siege to old Colonel Winston, and they say she is likely to get him too. We are not very well, my dear. The Colonel has had a lot of worry, and his health is giving way. He wants a bit of cheering, so when you can spare a week or two you will be more than welcome to your old friend,

"HARRIET O'BRIEN.

"P.S.—I must ask you to be very careful about enclosed. He is sure to know all about your fortune. The Colonel says he hopes you'll take good care he doesn't finger any of it."

Alice had purposely kept from her Essex friends all knowledge of the contested will, and evidently from Mrs. O'Brien's letter they had seen no allusion to the case in the English newspapers. She finished her tea before she opened the Indian letter, and when she did her lips curled as she read it. It was in its way a clever production. Stanley took as his cue the assumption that Alice was still at Colchester, and he in ignorance of all that had befallen her since the date of his last letter.

"RAJHPUTAN, NORTHERN PROVINCES.

"MY DEAR ALICE,—Perhaps you may have heard that I get my furlough at the end of this month, and I hope to be in England before Christmas. I won't write any more."

thing here except to say that I hope we may meet, and that you will give me an opportunity of fully explaining the past. It can be explained, and if you had written to me I would have tried long ago. I regretted that letter the moment it was written, and have gone on regretting it ever since. But I hope you will let me explain how it all happened.—Believe me, always your devoted,

“JIM STANLEY.”

Her lips curled again, and she tossed the offending sheet into the flames. How strange that this should meet her on the very threshold of her new life, which she had intended should have no part nor lot in the old.

“Everything seems to come too late,” she said, with a half-sigh. “But at least that page of my life will never be opened again.”

She tried to throw off the haunting memory of past days, and during the next two hours busied herself with preparing for the comfort of the new inmate of her house. She arrived in a cab about half-past six, with all her slender belongings, a little fearful and nervous, but entirely reassured by the warmth of the ~~new~~ home waiting for her. Alice herself took her up to the warm, comfortable room that had been prepared for her, and when she looked round and realised that she had at last found a home her sweet, sad mouth trembled.

“My dear, you must excuse me,” she said, with a wavering smile. “I am old, and I have had many dark days. I am like the children with a fairy tale; I cannot believe it true.”

“It’s all right, Cummie. May I call you Cummie? I said to Mrs. King it would be one of the first things I should ask you,” said Alice cheerily. “Thank you, then I shall, and you’re not going to be old at all, but just nice and comfortable and middle-aged. And now you are to keep me in strict order and fit me for the stiff Edinburgh society. You see I am Irish born, and a bit of a rover.”

"My dear, you are beautiful and kind and good," cried the little woman with all her heart in her eyes. She stood aside almost awestricken when the servants brought in her boxes and proceeded to unstrap them. "I hope you will find room, Cummie; if not there is the dressing-room beyond," said Alice. "This cupboard is locked, and the key has gone amissing. We must get the carpenter to see to it, but really there are only a few old medicine bottles in it, that is why I have never troubled about it at all."

"I shall not need it, Miss Harman. I have not so very much, and you must not trouble at all about me. You saw what I have been used to. I only hope this luxury won't be my undoing."

Alice smiled a little absently, and they dismissed the subject of the locked door, little dreaming that tragic circumstances should lead to its being forced open.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TRUANT LOVER

ALICE was not without her enemies and detractors in her own sphere of life. One so fearless and independent both in speech and behaviour could hardly hope to escape censure in a set somewhat narrow and prejudiced in their outlook. Mrs. King knew when she urged upon ~~the~~ the girl the necessity of an elderly companion that some such concession to the proprieties was absolutely necessary if her protégée were to take the place to which she was entitled. She proved herself a wise and prudent friend, and gave her much disinterested advice, for which Alice was grateful, though ~~some~~ of it she did not understand. She could see no harm, for instance, in being alone in the streets late at night when upon her errands of mercy; she was without fear, even in the squalid neighbourhoods where her work lay, and certainly she seemed to hear about her some talisman against evil.

Active personal work among the poor had not then become a fashionable pastime; the word "slumming" had not been invented. Then the dividing lines betwixt class and class were sharply defined, and Dr. Guthrie, promulgating his great philanthropic work for humanity, the establishment of ragged schools, was in the very thick of the opposition, which in a conservative city like Edinburgh, was certain to meet him. Another controversy, farther reaching perhaps though not more important, was then agitating the minds of men, and a

Disruption of a great body of independent thinking men and women from the State Church was imminent. They were exciting and even troublous times, but with the latter upheaval Alice Harman did not concern herself, though she heard it discussed in season and out of season at the house of her friends in Heriot Row, Marshall King being one of the most prominent of the lay members urgent for the great but irrevocable step. Her religion, or rather her theology, she might have found it difficult to define: it consisted in a high conception of her duty towards others, a more practical religion than is taught in the schools.

"Cummie," she said, as they sat at breakfast one morning about a week after they had "taken up house" together, "Dr. Guthrie is determined that I shall lose no time. He wants me to go there every day and investigate the case of a poor family in the Pleasance. Do you know how to get there? If not we must ask Christina. She was round there first, I remember."

"I know it very well," replied Miss Cummings, looking with a fervent admiration at the bright face opposite to her. "It is a very poor and sad neighbourhood, but I'll pilot you there if you like." Alice nodded, and proceeded with the rest of her letters.

"A note from Mrs. King asking us to come to a meeting this evening in her drawing-room to hear some speech about the Disruption. Are you interested in that?"

"You know I am," replied the little woman. "I was born in a country manse, and I know all the difficulties of the position, and what they are fighting for is liberty of conscience."

"Well, we'll go there, and I'll try to get up an interest. I am afraid you think me quite hopelessly lax, Cummie, but I do wish we could have a whole religion without creeds. Shall we go this morning, then, Cummie, as soon as I have seen to my housekeeping? I suppose it is not very far?"

• "Oh, no; quite near. We can go in ten minutes or so. And you must promise that I shall do, some of the talking. You were shamefully taken in yesterday."

"Oh, yes, but it did not harm me," replied Alice gaily. Her spirits were rising with each new day. Now that the strain of the past year was lifted her natural sunny temperament had begun to assert itself. The old governess, who had dwelt so long on the shadowy side of the street, felt herself irresistibly infected by her brightness, and began to look years younger. Each day in waking she, poor soul, would pour her heart out in thankfulness over the extraordinary change in her lot.

In about an hour's time, when they were ready to leave the house, the young page, whom Alice had taken for training on Dr. Guthrie's suggestion, came to inform her that a gentleman waited in the library to speak with her. He explained that the gentleman would give no name, and would not detain her long. She went down without any apprehension, but when she opened the door, and beheld a tall, military and quite familiar figure standing by the table, her heart seemed to stand still. But her confusion was only momentary. Then she drew herself up, and her face became fixed in a look of cold and haughty inquiry. But Captain Jim Stanley was not easily repulsed, and he flattered himself that he knew how to deal even with an angry woman.

"I did not send my name, Alice, fearing you would refuse to see me," he began, in a voice nicely adjusted to the proper tone of humility and regret. "Don't look so strangely at me. It was all a mistake. Will you think for a moment of our old happy days, while I try to explain how it all happened?"

She shook her head, and, resting her hand on the table for a moment as if to steady herself, looked him straight in the face.

"There is nothing you can say that I wish to hear, Captain Stanley. Surely the fact that I have never answered either of your letters might have convinced you that so far as I am concerned the past is as utterly done with as you seemed so ardently to desire."

He winced at the tone rather than the words. Though not a particularly sensitive man, he could not be unconscious of her withering scorn. But he would not accept his final dismissal without making one last effort to win her back. By this time he had learned from various sources of the great fortune which had fallen to her, and report as usual had considerably exaggerated the amount. But at the moment we must do him the justice to say that it was the woman rather than her possessions that appealed to him. Never had he seen her looking more fair.

"Of course I know that first letter of mine is difficult to explain away," he said hastily. "But at least let me try. It was written in all good faith. I had heard of your troubles at home, and I thought it mean to add to them."

"Yes, to add to them, as I should certainly have done had I married you——"

"You are hard on a chap, Alice; but really when Miss Travers came, and I heard about the other chap more definitely, I thought it only manly to withdraw, and let you have a chance of bettering your life."

"Whatever Miss Travers may have told you, Captain Stanley, it was not true, and even if it had been it should not have affected our relations. You ought to have come home to me, and if you had any complaint to make made it openly."

"I realised that when it was too late, Alice; but it isn't too late yet surely?" he pleaded eagerly.

"Yes, quite too late," she answered clearly and without the slightest falter in her voice. Indeed her calmness was singularly disconcerting. Had there been tears or even nervousness he would have felt himself on

familiar ground. But against the stone wall of what was apparently absolute indifference what protestations could avail?

He shifted uneasily from one foot to another, and tugged at his moustache in a savage endeavour to find some suitable and effective words.

"It's awfully hard to explain, Alice, but if you'll forgive me my whole life will be spent in your service, and I'll do my best to banish all doubts from your mind."

She looked at him steadily with a gaze which did not flinch. He deserved punishment; she was not the first woman he had caused to suffer, and she would not spare him.

"When I was poor and friendless and needing sympathy, and some one to stand by me, Captain Stanley, you failed me," she said clearly. "And now when I need none of these things I must bid you good-day. I have found a home and friends here, and have no further use for your friendship."

He reddened furiously, and involuntarily clenched his fist.

"You would dub me a fortune-hunter, Alice, but even Cicely, if you would ask her, would tell you I came to my senses before I ever heard a word about the change in your circumstances."

"That may be, but why prolong this discussion so painful and unnecessary? I must bid you good-day and good-bye, Captain Stanley."

"I've come a long way to see you, Alice; it is a sorry reward," he said thickly. "I'm disappointed; yes, I am. I thought you'd be able to probe beneath the surface, and discriminate when a fellow is really honest and single-minded."

"I trusted you once, Captain Stanley; I am unfortunately the kind of woman who cannot patch up a broken trust. When it goes it goes for ever. Good-bye!"

.. Unable to bear the strain a moment longer she gave her head a quick inclination, and with a slight wave of the hand left the room.

• And he, a sorry spectacle of a man, flouted and humiliated, had no alternative but to leave the house.

CHAPTER XXVII

MYSTERIES

THOUGH naturally upset by the nature of the interview with her old lover, it was characteristic of Alice Harman not to neglect or set aside any duty for her own personal feelings. She therefore called to Miss Cummings when she thought Stanley would have time to get out ^{of the} ^{house} ^{at} night, then they left the house together.

They did not, however, talk much as they walked, and though Miss Cummings was perfectly aware of some change in her young friend's demeanour, she asked no question, nor passed a single remark regarding it.

She had been trained in a good school. Having occupied a difficult and subordinate position in several households, she had learned the whole art of holding her tongue. Alice was more than grateful for her silence, which that morning did much to cement the excellent understanding between them. They crossed the South Bridge, and proceeded eastwards by way of Rankeillour Street, then a most respectable and better-class thoroughfare, only descending slightly in the social scale as it converged upon the poorer streets that clustered about the entrance to the Queen's Park.

At the extreme corner was the house where Dr. Gardiner had established his surgery. As they approached to within a few yards of it the door of that house was opened, and he came out, carrying a small black bag. He looked very seedy and out-at-elbows, with that peculiar depressing shabbiness one sees in

those who have fallen from a former estate. But Alice had no difficulty in recognising him at once.

"How strange, Cummie, that I should see him here! I have never seen him since that evening he came to give an opinion about my aunt."

"Who are you talking of, Miss Harman?"

"Professor Gardiner; look, he has just disappeared in that doorway."

"Professor Gardiner!"

Miss Cummings looked extremely puzzled as she repeated the name. "That is not Professor Gardiner, my dear."

"Oh, yes; it is," asserted Alice equably. "He is a striking figure of a man, and one would not easily forget him. Besides, he was in the house quite a long time, and I stood close to him listening to his report for about ten minutes. But I am surprised to see him here, and so queerly dressed. He did not look like that when he came to George Square. Do you happen to know if he is eccentric?"

"I know him very well, if you mean Professor Gardiner, of the University," said Miss Cummings, a little warmly. "I ought to know him, for I taught his two daughters music for three years, and saw him nearly every day. And I assure you he is one of the most polished gentlemen in Edinburgh, and so particular about his dress that the students make fun out of his foppishness. He is always in the height of fashion."

"How extraordinary! But that is Professor Gardiner, Cummie."

"No, my dear; a little like him in figure, I admit, but Professor Gardiner, no! I know him, I hope, as well as my own father, and he knows me. Didn't you see him look at us, and without the faintest recognition?"

"It is very curious!" said Alice, in a puzzled voice.

"Come back, Cummie, and let us look at the plate on the door."

The little woman turned with great alacrity, and they ventured up to the door, where the name Dr. Gardiner was printed indisputably enough.

"There, Cummie, you see I am right!" said Alice, with her odd smile.

"It is the same name, but not the man, Alice," maintained Miss Cummings stoutly, but Alice remained unconvinced.

"Is it not possible that he may have a surgery here, and work among the poor people?" she suggested. "He looks as if he would like to do kindness to those who could not afford to pay."

"That is true of him certainly, but he would not do it in this way," said Miss Cummings. "If you understood a little more about the etiquette of things, my dear, you would know that a distinguished Professor of Edinburgh University would not have an open surgery here. You must have made some mistake."

Alice remained silent, unconvinced, but the positive assurance of her companion raised a strange uncomfortable feeling in her mind, and she could not rid herself of it. The sight of the man who had intervened at the crisis of her aunt's illness brought back all the memories of that painful time, and especially recollections of the Ruthvens, whom she had endeavoured to forget. And the more she thought of it all, the more puzzling it seemed to become. Presently they came to the wretched hovel where Dr. Guthrie had bidden them unearth the children and inquire into their condition. They found so much sordid misery and actual suffering there that other thoughts were for the time banished from her mind. But when they got home at the luncheon hour the subject of Dr. Gardiner recurred persistently to her mind, and she even spoke of it to Christina.

"Do you remember the doctor who came to see Miss Dempster the night before she died?" she asked, incidentally, when she had an opportunity of speaking to the girl alone.

Instantly a curious look passed over Christina's expressive face, and her colour slightly rose.

"Ay, Miss Alice, I mind him fine."

"Would you know him again?"

"Ay, Miss Alice, that I would."

"Well, this afternoon I want you to do something for me, Christina. You know Rankeillour Street, of course?"

"Yes, Miss Alice."

"There's a doctor's surgery there with the name Dr. Gardiner on the door. I want you to knock at the door. Go right in, and ask for some medicine for yourself. As you have had neuralgia lately, you can ask him for something for that. I want you to see whether he is the same doctor who came here that night."

"He is the same, Miss Alice; I kent him the moment I set eyes on him."

"You mean that you recognised him the night he came here?"

"Yes, Miss Alice."

"And he actually has a surgery in Rankeillour Street?"

Christina nodded.

"Do the people down there know he is the great Dr. Gardiner that teaches at the University?"

Christina shook her head.

"I've never heard them say. He's very skilly an' everybody likes him, but he's hardly ever sober."

"What?"

Alice uttered the monosyllable sharply and with evident indignation.

"It's quite true, Miss Alice. I've kent him for years, aboot the Pleesance an' a' roond aboot. A'boddy kens him, but they dinna mind the drink he's that skilly, and he's no hard aboot payment I've heard them say."

Alice's face was a study. It became startlingly grave.

"There is something here I can't understand, Christina, and I mean to try and get to the bottom of it, though it won't benefit my poor aunt now. Meanwhile you'll say nothing about this. I know I can trust you."

"I'll never say a word. I can hold my tongue, Miss Alice."

"Evidently, but don't you think it might have been your duty to have told me your suspicions that night?"

"Oh, Miss Alice," said the girl, in rather a hurt tone of voice. "What right had I to speak? I thoct it was a' richt, for he's very clever, an' bein' near like, I thoct the doctor had got him quickly."

"Yes, yes. I was unjust," said Alice hastily, seeing the reasonableness of the girl's explanation. "Run away and don't trouble your head about it any further. I can trust you to say nothing."

Reassured, Christina retired; but though she held her tongue with great ease and faithfulness, she was under no embargo against thinking her own thoughts. And they were a very queer medley. When she brought up the tea at five o'clock she lingered a little, evidently wishing to speak to her mistress. Cummie was dozing over the paper by the fire, and not alert as to what was passing.

"Well, Christina, what is it?"

"Please, miss, I've been to the surgery, an' it is him. I thoct I wad go to make certain."

Alice nodded.

"I was certain too, but it does not matter; in the meantime say nothing about it," she replied, though in her own mind she resolved to make some effort to come face to face with the real Professor Gardiner.

As it happened her desire was gratified in a very simple and natural way that very evening. A meeting of leading laymen interested in the great Disruption controversy was to be held that evening in the house of Mrs. Marshall King. To this meeting both Miss

Cummings and Alice had been invited, and when they arrived at eight o'clock the large library of the house was already full, and some one speaking. Mrs. King sat near the door, and gave them a warm welcome as they entered.

"Who is that speaking?" asked Alice, in a sharp, strange voice.

"I thought you would recognise Professor Gardiner; doesn't he speak well?"

Alice was silent, regarding him with a keen, almost painful, interest. She observed that the likeness between the two men was only very superficial: they were of the same height and build, but their faces did not resemble in the least. The real Professor, one of the cleverest and most intellectual men of his day, bore the seal of his high gifts and consecrated life on his fine face. Alice noted the extreme fastidiousness of his dress, and the mystery grew in her mind. Small wonder that she could not give her undivided attention to the purpose for which the meeting had been convened. Mrs. King had asked her to come, not so much for the purpose of hearing what passed, but that she might see some of the very pick and choice of Edinburgh's leading citizens.

"You might never see such a gathering again, my dear," she whispered, as she mentioned a few of the names. "I assure you it's a unique, almost a historic occasion."

When the meeting was over and had largely dispersed, Alice and Miss Cummings stayed to partake of coffee, and to be introduced to such as remained. But they all went at last, and as they too were preparing to go, Mrs. King broached another subject.

"Alice, I had a letter from Jack this morning, and he is making great preparations to receive us at White's Moss. Nothing is going to intervene, I hope, to prevent us having that real old-fashioned country Christmas we've so often spoken about. Jack is making the

mendous preparations, and the boys will arrive at Blenkenfoot on Tuesday. We hope to join them on Wednesday if Tom can get away. You'll be ready, won't you?"

"Oh, yes! How strange that I should be at Blenkenfoot again this very month. Just a year since I passed through it, and met your brother first."

"An eventful year, eh, Alice?"

"Oh, very; it has in one way seemed like a century, and in another has gone like a flash. And, do you know, I have an odd unsettled feeling even yet as if I only held my present position by the most slender thread. Do you believe in presentiments, Lucy?"

"I was brought up on them, my dear. Cummie will tell you how she found us crammed with all sorts of superstitions instilled into us by our old Highland nurse."

"Well, I've a presentiment that my troubles are not over yet, and that the biggest is to come."

Mrs. King tried to laugh her out of her fears and forebodings, but both were soon to prove them only too real.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AT WHITE'S MOSS

THE old house of White's Moss stood high among the rolling billows of the hills that encircled the whole glen of Blenkenfoot. Yet it had been set in a sheltered spot, with the high pinnacle of the Red Cairn behind it, and a thick firwood on the east, to break the blast as it swept up or down the valley. It was a broad low house, originally built of whinstone, but now harled over, which made it a conspicuous white landmark for the whole glen.

The Moss, from which it took its name, and which was reminiscent of some of the darkest tragedies of Covenanting days, spread away to the west of the house, a strange level stretch, set at high altitude, and having a small dismal loch in the middle. As the carriage drove up from the coach stopping-place on that crisp, bright December day, the loch was lying in the shadow, and looked so black that involuntarily Alice averted her head with a little shiver. She was on the front seat beside Traquair, who was perhaps unduly anxious that his home and surroundings should make a favourable impression on her mind.

"What a strange, wild, weird spot," she said. "It looks as if any tragedy could be enacted in its vicinity."

"Oh, don't say that!" answered Traquair quickly. "It only wants the sun, and then you will sing its praises. We are very proud of Blenken Loch. You must ask the boys about it. It's their happy hunting-

ground, and they can tell you yarns about the fishes to be found in its depths."

"I am sure it must be very deep. One never finds that peculiar still look except when there is great depth. I've heard my father say it was characteristic of the Irish lakes."

"It is deep, I admit. I don't think anybody has ever fathomed it," he replied. "There's the house, Miss Harman, and the sun's on it. Nice house, isn't it?"

Alice slightly raised herself in her seat, and shaded her eyes with her hand so she could see it better.

"It is lovely; just like a picture; but how lonely you must be here!"

"Not so bad at all," he answered, a trifle shyly. "I'm tired at nights tramping the hills after the sheep, and when I get my pipe and my book or my paper I manage to be pretty content. Then we've some very good neighbours, who don't forget that I'm a lone bachelor."

"I see," she answered, with a smile. "Well, I'm glad I've seen your home Mr. Traquair; I'm quite sure it will help me to understand you better."

Traquair was silent a moment pondering these words.

"Would you mind telling me just what you mean by that, Miss Harman?" he asked, as he slackened the reins preparatory to their ascending the last slope to the house.

"It isn't easy to explain, but I'll try," she answered, in perfect good faith. "You take a large, sound, gentle view of life; it is because you live here away from its fret and fever, and are able to rise above the sordid part of it all."

Traquair's face flushed a little at these unexpected words, but any answer he might have been rashly tempted to make was prevented by a sudden war-whoop which indicated that the lads were not far off.

Presently they appeared in sight, eager to greet their parents, and riotously delighted at the prospect of the fortnight they were to spend together. It began auspiciously on that bright winter day, and there was no hint of the coming tragedy in the air. Alice gave herself up to unrestrained enjoyment of the delights of country life, to which she was not quite a stranger. Traquair found out that she could ride, and sent to Edinburgh for a side saddle. Then she and Mrs. King laid their plans together for the concoction of a habit out of somewhat scanty material, and there was a great deal of innocent fun got out of the experiment. Finally it was completed, and she set out with Traquair for a pilgrimage across the bridle-paths, he promising to show her the utmost limits of his domain. She was a graceful and fearless horsewoman; like most well-bred women she looked her best in the saddle. And there was no question about her enjoyment of it all.

"Oh," she said, drawing a long breath as they paused once on a ride on the opposite side of the valley, "this is real life and health! This is the one thing I envy you, a dear horse like this and leisure to ride it."

Traquair tried to keep his eyes off her glowing face, fully aware how it was leading to his undoing.

"You have everything in your power now," he said abruptly. "Why, you could keep six horses if you liked."

"And ride them demurely through Edinburgh streets," she said, with a little side glance. "That's not the sort of riding I should like. This is the only thing worthy of the name. It reminds me of the dear Indian days when my father first taught me how to manage a horse."

"What a pity he did not live till now. You would have been very happy together," he said, in his simple, sincere way. Her eyes suddenly filled as she bent down to stroke her horse's glossy neck, trying to hide her tears.

"It is always so in life, don't you think: the desired comes too late?"

"I hope not always, though sometimes one has to wait a while," he replied. "I wish I could tell you how honestly glad I am to have you here! How little we expected that day we met at the Blenkenfoot Inn that you'd ever come up to White's Moss or ride my Jeanie Deans."

"Is that her name? How pretty! How I should like to have her always!"

It was on the point of his tongue to offer her not only Jeanie, but the whole of the rest of his possessions, but he was restrained by the remembrance that he was only a poor, struggling sheep farmer, doing his best to make the bare hills pay. He had no reason to complain so far, only the modest profit that had been sufficient for his need, and up till now for his ambition, shrank into nothingness beside the wealth possessed by the girl he had learned to love.

"I wish," he said slowly, "that you had never got any money from Miss Dempster."

She smiled at him, as she began to guide her horse's steps slowly down the steep bridle-path.

"Sometimes I wish it myself, Mr. Traquair. It's not an unruined good for a woman to have money, especially a lonely one like me. Don't be surprised if you hear that I've done something mad with it one of these days, made it over perhaps in deed of gift to Dr. Guthrie to help endow his ragged schools, and only keeping enough to save me from real care." Do you know, the only time I really enjoy my possession is when I look at poor old Cummie, and think what I have been able to do for her."

"Ah, I daresay. Lucy tells me she lives in a kind of glorified state, half afraid that each day of happiness will be her last."

"Oh, she's getting used to it now, and we've left her entertaining another poor old thing for the Christmas

holidays at George Square. I wish you could have seen the two of them when I left. That was pure joy if you like! What's that driving up the glen? It's so unusual to see anything on the roads one feels as if they are trespassing at once."

Traquair looked in a puzzled way down the long stretch of road that wound like a serpent from end to end of the deep valley.

"It's the dogcart from the Blenkenfoot, but what puzzles me is who can be in it. I'm expecting nobody, and they must be going to White's Moss, as the road doesn't lead anywhere else."

"We're going home anyhow now, aren't we, so if it's any one seeking you they won't need to wait long."

When they reached the level they rode side by side again, talking unrestrainedly. Alice had a very deep, sincere liking for the straightforward, honest man, who had made such a favourable impression on her mind the day she had met him first, and her afternoon had been one of pure enjoyment. They rode close by the edge of the Blenken Loch, when they ascended again, and once more she looked at it with a little shiver.

"It's the one bit of White's Moss I don't like. It's a cruel place, Jack—oh, I beg your pardon," she added, reddening furiously, as the name slipped out unawares. "You must not blame me, but the boys and Lucy. It's hard for me sometimes to remember, Mr. Traquair."

"Why should you anyhow?" he asked boldly. "If you call me by my name I shall be only too much honoured."

"Well, I should like to," she admitted frankly. "And if you follow suit I will. There are two strangers waiting at the gate, one a policeman. Do you know them?"

Jack craned his head forward, then shook it.

"Never saw them before. Queer-looking chaps, aren't they? Strangers here; wonder what they can want?" They rode on rather more quickly, and when

they reached the gate. Alve urged her horse forward a little in front to leave a clear space for Traquair to speak to the men, who were evidently waiting for her.

As she passed them they both looked at her with a bold, straight gaze which slightly disconcerted her. Then the elder of the two with a somewhat compassionate air touched his hat. She only acknowledged the salutation with a faint inclination of the head, then rode on quickly to the house.

"Are you waiting for me, gentlemen?" asked Traquair, preparing to dismount.

"We are, Mr. Traquair," replied the elder. "We were informed by one of your servants that you were out riding with Miss Harman, and when we saw you coming decided to wait here."

"Well, what is it you want?"

They stepped forward, looking quite evidently as if they did not like their errand.

"It's a bit awkward and difficult, Mr. Traquair. Our business is really with Miss Harman, but out of consideration for her and the rest in the house we thought we'd see you first."

"Well, what is it? Remember that I am in suspense, though I am quite at a loss to know what business you can have with Miss Harman. Evidently she did not know you."

"Oh, no, she wouldn't," said the elder, as he fumbled at his breast pocket, from which he presently drew forth a long official-looking envelope.

"It's a mighty unpleasant job, but I'm only a Crown servant, Mr. Traquair, and I hope you'll be civil to us both. Read that, then we can consult what will be best to do to make it as pleasant as possible for the young lady."

Traquair took the ominous-looking document in his hand, which was now visibly shaking.

Almost at the first word his face whitened, and he

staggered against the horse standing patiently by. The thing he held in his hand was a warrant for the arrest of Alice Harman for the murder of Miss Katherine Dempster at 84 George Square on the seventeenth day of February last.

CHAPTER XXIX

AN INCREDIBLE BLOW

TRAQUAIR recovered himself by a mighty effort. Alice had called him gentle; she had not meant that he was weak. He was one of those to whom a crisis or an emergency brings the strength of ten. And he loved the woman against whom such a terrible accusation had been brought, how deeply and unselfishly she was yet to prove.

He leaned against the warm, kindly side of his patient horse for a second, while the stolid-faced emissaries of the law turned decently away. Doubtless they understood how it was; they had seen the light of the morning on the young faces as they rode up together. They were men of ordinary human and kindly feeling; moreover, they did not believe that the girl with the sweet face and the starry eyes could be guilty. But it was not their place or province to make statements or advance theories: they had simply to obey, to do the work for which they were paid.

Suddenly Traquair flung up his head, and shook himself as one awakening from sleep. His momentary agitation mastered, all the fine strength of his character seemed to be reflected in his face and in his whole bearing.

"Who," he asked thickly, "who brings this infamous charge?"

"I believe there is more than one accuser," replied the principal frankly enough, though he was not entitled

to answer any questions. "The chief evidence, however, has been given to the Fiscal by one of Miss Dempster's old servants who shared the nursing with Miss Harman. I cannot tell you any more, sir, and before you go indoors I would like to warn you that anything the young lady herself may say might prejudice her case. She will be better to say nothing at all at present."

Traguir glanced in the direction of the house, and his lips worked again as if his feelings were likely to master him.

"You will allow me to go inside and prepare her for what is going to happen? I give you my word of honour that there will be no attempt at escape or evasion."

He added the last words hastily, observing doubt and unwillingness in the officer's eyes.

"I accept your word, but I must ask you to make haste. We have kept the trap, and hope to catch the coach at Blenkenfoot at half-past five."

"You can't do it," replied Traguir quietly. "And what is going to happen then? Do you wish to take Miss Harman with you?"

The officer nodded grimly.

"She is from this moment under arrest, and must accompany us."

"To Edinburgh, and what then?" he asked unsteadily.

The officer shrugged his shoulders.

"There is only one place, sir, for suspected persons charged with such a crime. She will be at once lodged in jail."

"But bail will be allowed?" he said eagerly. "It will be forthcoming even to an exorbitant sum."

"It will not be allowed; it never is for such a serious offence," he replied civilly but emphatically. "May I ask you to make haste if you have anything to say to the young lady?" he added, in a slightly suggestive voice.

But Traquair did not make haste.

"Look here, man, as you can't possibly reach Blenkenfoot in time, not even if you flew, you ought to stop here all night. I'll give you good quarters. Your—your prisoner will not escape, and you will get the coach at Blenkenfoot to-morrow at nine o'clock."

"Wouldn't it be better for us to go down to the inn and stop the night there?"

Traquair looked him straight in the eyes.

"I don't know your name, but you look a kindly man. Think of the monstrous circumstances of the case. Miss Harman is incapable, my God, how incapable of such a crime you can't even understand. This very afternoon she was complaining that her money was a burden, and that she might be tempted to give it all away to the cause of charity. Is that the spirit of a woman who will commit murder to secure a fortune, for, I suppose, that will be the motive alleged?"

"I know nothing about the motive, sir," replied the officer, not betraying that he was touched by the words. "My business is with the charge. I don't pretend that it is a pleasant duty or that I enjoy it. Indeed, I have never had one less to my liking. But it's got to be done. Now, may I trouble you? We can't stand here any longer, though I am willing to wait, having your word of honour, until you have spoken to the young lady inside."

"You can come up, and go in by the kitchen door. They'll give you some refreshment there, and your horse will be attended to," said Traquair, mindful of the hospitality of White's Moss, even in the midst of his terrible anguish. "My sister and brother-in-law are here. You will know him by name, Mr. Marshall King, the City Chamberlain, a name in itself a guarantee of good faith."

So saying Traquair stalked towards the house, the men following at a little distance. From the window of the room where she was changing her habit Alice

watched them come up, in no way dismayed or alarmed, having accepted in absolute good faith Traquair's suggestion that they had come on poaching business.

That they could have anything to do with her, Alice never for a moment dreamed. Innocence is ever unconscious and without fear.

A gardener, sweeping the gravel about the door, took the reins from his master's hand at a word from him, and led off the horse, at the same time looking askance at the men coming up behind.

Traquair waited a moment in the wide low porch, and, when they came up, motioned them in. He went himself with them to the kitchen, and instructed his housekeeper to get them a substantial tea. One of Mrs. King's smart Edinburgh servants was sitting by the window. She had just been lamenting the dulness of White's Moss, and was pleased at the diversion of having company to entertain. Convinced that the men were all right, and with a significant nod, indicating that he would keep faith, Traquair left them and went in search of his brother-in-law.

He found him stretched on the couch in the dining-room just awaking from an afternoon nap. At White's Moss King, an inordinately busy man when in town, went in for the rest cure, and he laughed as he stretched himself and rose.

"Well, had a good ride? It's a fine afternoon, isn't it?"

"Where's Lucy?" asked Traquair, and some quality in his voice struck his brother-in-law strangely.

"They were both in here a moment ago. What's up? Has anything happened?"

"Something awful has happened, Tom, positively awful. They've come from Edinburgh to arrest Miss Harman."

"What!"

Marshall King was rather a small man, and he almost bounded off his seat.

"What are you saying? Arrest Miss Harman, in Heaven's name what for?"

"For murdering her aunt."

The two men stared at one another a moment in blank silence and dismay.

"Well," said King at last, "of all the blatant asses in creation commend me to the law! Who trumped up such an infamous charge? It won't hold water for a moment. Why, even to look at the girl is enough."

"It won't avail her this time; her looks, I mean," said Traquair savagely. "She's got to go through with the whole ghastly business whatever the consequences. Think of it, Tom, a sensitive, highly strung nature like hers subjected to the infamy and odium of the dock. We know what she suffered when the other trial was going on. She's only now beginning to recover. My God, it's awful!"

The honest fellow broke down and sobbed for a moment unrestrainedly. Marshall King's face was the picture of grave sympathy.

Knowing from his wife how deeply attached Traquair was to the girl, he did not wonder at the depth of feeling he displayed, but rather honoured him for it.

"Don't give way, Jack," he said, laying a kind hand on his shoulder. "We'll manage to pull her through among us, or I'll know the reason why. And we'll make it as easy for her as possible."

"But she's got to go to jail, Tom! and the police tell me bail won't be allowed."

"We'll see about it; a little oil can sometimes grease the obstinate cartwheels," said King, trying to speak cheerily. "Where is she? Has she any idea?"

Traquair dismally shook his head.

"That's the ordeal before us. I've put the men in the kitchen and they're feeding at present."

"She's seen them, though, for she mentioned in here a few minutes ago that you were engaged with policemen

outside about some poaching business. I wondered a little about it myself, never having heard that poaching was one of the cardinal sins of the Blenken Glen."

"I had to say something, don't you see, and I must say they were very decent about it. I think myself that the sight of her rather staggered them. But they want to take her down to the inn to sleep the night. We can't allow that, Tom; you know what old Keddie is. You must talk to them with all the weight of your officialism. Meantime she's got to be told."

He groaned as he spoke, and the look of absolute misery on his face was pathetic.

"Who did they say trumped up this charge?"

"One of the servants. It'll be that old Dalgleish we've heard about, but there's no doubt she's been instigated by the Ruthvens."

"I should imagine so. You see the other case is too fresh in the public mind, and would have prejudiced opinion against them."

"But isn't it odd that there has never been a hint of anything in the newspapers?" asked Jack, wonderingly.

"Well, you see, before the warrant could be issued, there must have been some grounds to go upon. I believe in this case the body of the old lady must have been exhumed and submitted to expert examination. I'm presuming that it's poison they're seeking for. The Fiscal has to issue that order, and authorise a medical expert to make the examination. All this would be done, of course, without publicity. Don't you see the necessity? In the case of a possibly guilty person, at the first note of alarm he would be off."

Traquair nodded, duly enlightened.

"It's the Ruthvens' doing, depend upon it. Well, Tom, I know I can rely upon you to help her. I'm prepared to spend every penny I possess, though heaven knows that isn't much. But she must be defended properly."

"She'll have the best, of course, and she's quite able

to pay. These are matters to be considered afterwards, Jack. Meanwhile we must get her told."

They heard a light laugh in the distance, and the sound of approaching footsteps. Almost immediately the door opened, and Mrs. King entered, followed by Alice. Instantly the atmosphere of the room seemed to arrest them, the look of strain on the faces of the two men spoke its note of warning and appeal. Alice, quick as a needle, surmised partly at least that something untoward had happened. She came forward paling visibly, but not otherwise perturbed.

"What is it?" was all she said.

CHAPTER XXX

IN THE QUEEN'S NAME

TRAQUAIR turned away unable to speak. Mr. King swallowed a lump in his throat as he looked at his wife's fair face, upon which a vague horror seemed to have gathered. It was to Alice, however, he spoke.

"My dear girl," he began, then something choked him. There was a moment's desperate silence. Alice broke it, and her voice was clear and penetrating.

"Something has happened, or is going to happen to me," she said. "These men I saw at the door! It is I they have come to seek."

"You are right, Alice. A monstrous, an infamous charge has been lodged against you by unscrupulous and wicked persons. But be of good courage. The law, whose duty of course it is to investigate such charges, without regard to the position or personality of the accused person, will be equally quick to make amends. It is an accusation too monstrous to stand for a moment."

"Put it into words," was all she said.

"They have come to arrest you on a charge of hastening your aunt's death."

Lucy King gave a slight scream. Alice looked round, wonderingly, and faintly smiled.

"To arrest me! Does that mean that I must go with these men?"

"Unfortunately, yes; but you will not go alone, we

shall all go," said King quickly, almost unmanned by the piteous entreaty in the girl's eyes.

"They are policemen. I have to go with them as a common prisoner, handcuffed, perhaps, as I have seen poor wretches often, and pitied them. My God, what have I done to deserve this?"

Mrs. King ran to her, and would have put her compassionate loving arms about her, but Alice gently set her aside.

"Don't, Lucy; you must see that I need all my courage. No one must pity me or show me any sympathy, else I must break down," she said, with a strange, hurried tremor in her voice. "Where are they? Have I to go with them to-day?"

"They say at once," said Traquair, speaking for the first time. "But I think I have persuaded them that they must sleep here all night, and we shall set out in the morning."

"Perhaps I had better see them," she said, with a sudden falter in her voice. "I am very sorry, my friends, that through me you should suffer this horrible indignity in your house, the house that has been so kind a shelter to me. Let me go with them quietly, so that none need know I have been here. I am not afraid. I am innocent, and trust in God to protect me and clear me of this horrible and unjust charge."

Traquair stepped forward, and his sister looked at him, almost holding her breath. It was a moment when the veil must be rent, when the innermost feelings of the heart could be laid bare without a pang. Therefore did Jack Traquair speak that which he had treasured as his soul's secret, which he feared he would need to carry with him to the grave.

"Listen, Alice. This very day, when tempted almost beyond belief to tell you of my feelings for you, I refrained, because you were rich and I a poor man, and the crime of self-seeking might have been laid to my charge. An hour ago I thought you beyond my reach;

now, because you are in trouble, I offer you all I have to give. If you will give me the right even now, I will marry you before this dreadful affair goes a step farther. It is all I can do to show my belief in you. And if it should come to a happy issue, as it must do if there is justice in heaven, you will be free afterwards to live your own life, unless," he added, hesitatingly, "I should be so blessed as to have won the priceless treasure of your love."

Lucy, the impulsive and warm-hearted, burst into tears. The eyes of the woman to whom this unselfish offer was made became luminous as the stars. She crossed the room, and offered Traquair her hand with a gesture of infinite gratitude.

"Whatever happens I will never forget," ~~she said~~ simply. "No; I will not take advantage of your generous offer, but whatever the end, the thought of your courage and devotion will live in my heart for ever. Now you have given me courage to see these men. Where are they?"

"Before they come, Alice," said Marshall King, "let me only add that you may rely upon everything being done that can be done to prove your innocence. Certain formalities the law has to go through, and, if bail can be obtained, rest assured that no stone will be left unturned. Happily I have influence in many quarters, and will use it to the uttermost."

"If it is refused, I shall have to remain, I suppose, in prison."

He nodded, and bit his lip.

"Even that can be endured, if I am sure that you believe in me. Tell me that none of you have the smallest doubt! You believe that I could not, would not, be guilty of such a terrible thing."

"God forbid! don't speak of it, Alice; to hint at it even is to insult you and ourselves. And, further, let me assure you that those who have brought this vile charge shall not be suffered to go unpunished. I pledge

myself that they shall be hunted down, and brought to account for every item of it."

Alice looked at Traquair. "He understood that the strain was telling, that if the next part of the ordeal was to be gone through with becoming dignity there must be no delay. He turned upon his heel, and left the room. In less than two minutes he returned, accompanied by the officers of the law.

"Miss Harman is here," he said thickly. "Get it over as quickly as possible."

The officer advanced to where she stood, and addressed her directly:—

"Alice Harman, in the Queen's name, I have to arrest you on a charge of murdering Miss Katherine Dempster at 84 George Square in the month of February last".

"I am innocent of the charge, sir," she replied, in a low, steady voice.

"That may be, but it is my duty to ask you to accompany me to Edinburgh, where the charge will be formally brought."

"Who lodged it first?" she asked.

He hesitated a moment.

"Interested and, I believe, competent persons, whose names I am not at liberty to divulge, and I have further to warn you, in the usual formal way, that anything you may say now may be used against you in evidence. It may be as well in your interests if you keep silence altogether."

"I have no wish to say anything, sir; this is neither the time nor the place. My only regret is that the business had not been carried through with sufficient speed to enable you to visit me in my own house before I came here. This is a horrible indignity for my friends, to whose kindness I owe so much."

"Pray don't speak of it," said Marshall King hurriedly. "Well, if you have said all that is necessary to the young lady, my men, will you come outside with me? We are responsible and law-abiding persons."

"I give you my word, and you know me sufficiently well, I think, to accept it as a guarantee, that no attempt will be made on our part, or Miss Harman's, to evade the law."

"I have already accepted this gentleman's assurance," said the officer, glancing towards Traquair, "and I am only too eager to do all that I can to soften this painful business." If, as I understand, it is impossible for us to get away from Blenkenfoot to-night, I shall be glad to accept your hospitality for the night, and to leave Miss Harman quite at liberty on your undertaking that she will be ready to accompany us on our journey back to Edinburgh early to-morrow morning."

"We shall all be ready," said Marshall King quickly.

The officer bowed and withdrew, followed by Marshall King, who wished some more explicit and enlightening conversation regarding the affair. But he found him the reverse of communicative, though respectful enough in view of the position of the gentleman who interrogated him.

The word of honour having been given, however, he suffered his prisoner to spend the evening unmolested among her friends. Needless to say, there was little or no sleep for those under the old roofter of White's Moss. The boys, from whom the whole truth had been withheld, were quite conscious that something terrible and alarming had happened, and the presence of policemen in the house filled them with the liveliest excitement. They were sent early and somewhat rebelliously to bed, where, however, they did not sleep, but lay discussing the unusual event in low tones which did not penetrate to the room below.

There the trio of friends sat far into the night discussing the whole matter, and though they always came back to the starting-point that it was a monstrous and iniquitous charge, they could not better the girl's dreadful position. Marshall King, however, was full of plans and hopes. He would rouse the whole of

Edinburgh in her behalf, and, if need be, petition the young Queen on behalf of a forlorn and helpless girl unjustly accused. The whole question of defence, and the line it should take, was discussed also, and Alice showed herself mistress of every possibility. She had evidently no apprehension of a serious ending, and only shrank from the publicity and humiliation of her position.

About midnight Lucy, very pale and hollow-eyed, rose and said they must go upstairs. Alice took her candle, and before she turned to the stairs opened the front door and looked out. It was a lovely moonlight night, a wonderful flood of white radiance lying on the encircling hills, and making objects at a distance stand out with startling clearness.

"I should like to go for a little turn," she said wistfully. "Perhaps I shall not see the sky and the hills again for a long time."

Traquair took her candle from her, lifted a shawl from the old settle box in the hall, and they passed out together. The two left within made no attempt to keep them back, nor did they speak a word as they solemnly ascended the stairs to their own room.

Outside Traquair took her arm and held it close to his side.

"You are very good," she said, almost tenderly. "If I do not seem to say enough, believe me it is because I cannot."

"Hush," he made answer in a full significant voice. "You know what is in my heart concerning you. What I do is the very wine of life to me. To be able to render you the smallest service is more to me than I shall ever be able to tell you."

She answered nothing, but allowed her hand to rest on his arm, and there came to her a sudden assurance that no woman however beset could be utterly forlorn with such an arm, such a strong heart to stand by her in her hour of need.

So they came, as if with one accord, to the side of the Blenken Loch, on which the weird beauty of the moonlight lay.

"I have never seen it like this, and so I shall remember it, and all this dear place where I have passed the most beautiful days of my life," she said, with a sudden falter in her voice.

They stood still, and he looked down upon her charming face.

"Alice, you will remember what I have said. I will hold to it, whatever the consequences of the next months. Promise me that you will remember."

She turned, lifted her face to his, and held out both her hands.

"I thought I was done with that," she said. "But now I know I have never understood its meaning. I will remember, and pray God every day of my life that one day we may stand together by these waters, happier than we are to-night."

He drew her to him and their lips met.

Only the stars and the lonely hills and the mysterious waters of the Blenken Loch witnessed their solemn betrothal.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE THUNDERBOLT

IN the absence of her mistress, Christina Caldwell was very busy doing many extra duties in the house. The service of love differs from all other services in this that it creates and devises new channels in which to run. Christina needed no reminding of her responsibilities. The difficulty was to get her to take a reasonable amount of recreation and leisure therefrom. She paid great heed to the ladies left in her care. Miss Harman had enjoined upon her the necessity for attendance to their comfort in every detail. It was no task, however. Miss Cummings, by the simple modesty and true kindness of her manner, had endeared herself to the whole household, and a position that can so easily be converted into one of discomfort and ambiguity had been made by her a conspicuous success, and this without effort: she had the heart of the true gentlewoman, and in return for unfailing consideration towards others received a like consideration herself.

The whole order and routine of the house were carried on precisely as if the young mistress was still at home. Breakfast was carried in punctually at eight, Christina taking this duty on herself. She had begged that in addition, to her particular duties as lady's-maid she should be allowed to wait at table when they were alone.

As it was no conventional household, and Alice liked to have the faithful girl about her, she had readily consented. Christina's chief ally and favourite was William

Urquhart, the page boy, whom she had taken under her special wing. He was a very bright specimen, clever beyond the common, and only requiring a little care and teaching to convert him into a first-class servant. Christina superintended him diligently, and they had in the course of each day several battles royal, which, however, never cast any shadow on their good understanding. On the second morning after the events related in the last chapter, she came out of the dining-room to behold William Urquhart sitting calmly on the settle instead of polishing the beeswaxed floor of the hall, which was part of his morning duty.

"Weelyum!" she called out warningly, "pit that paper instanter!" To hear Christina utter the word instanter, with a long emphasis on the second syllable, was a study in the ethics of sound. It was a word only lately acquired, and in her dealings with William she often rolled it as a sweet morsel under her tongue. In the kitchen, indeed, she was called "Instanter" when they wanted to tease her particularly.

"What richt have you to be readin' papers at your age? Pit it doon, and whaur's your duster? See, it's twenty meenits to eight o'clock, and the leddies will be doon in ten meenits, and they dinna want to see rub-bitch like you sitting on seats readin' the newspaper."

But William took no heed. He did not even seem to hear. His eyes seemed to be glued to the sheet open before him, and Christina observed suddenly that there was something unusual in his expression. She therefore, without saying another word, approached his side, and bending down endeavoured to discover what was interesting him.

He put up a grimy finger, which seemed to be a trifle instead, and pointed to the headline, which stood in large type at the top of the second page—

"Extraordinary and Sensational Development of the Dempster Will Case. Arrest of Miss. Harmán on a Charge of Murder."

Christina did not scream. She took the paper forcibly from the unwilling hand of William, and herself read every word of the long paragraph, heedless of the fact that her duties in the dining-room were not yet finished; and that the ladies would be ready for their breakfast. Her face went very white as she read a brief but telling account of the dramatic arrest of Miss Harman at White's Moss, and her journey to Edinburgh under the care of the constables, also the appalling addition that she was now safely lodged in prison.

The last sentence, was—"Prisoner has declined to make any statement until she has seen her solicitor. She will be brought up on the formal charge in Court to-day."

"~~isn't it~~, isn't it, Teen?" asked William sympathetically, and in a very subdued tone of voice.

"Awfu's no the word, laddie!" Eh, mighty, surely God's deid!"

She spoke the words in simple earnest as the only solution or explanation of the monstrous thing that had happened. William shrank a little away, his bright spirit cowed for the moment by something in the face of his ally he had never seen before. It was the pathos of an intolerable anguish that could not be put into words.

"Maybe she'll get off, Teen," he hastened to try and comfort her. "They sometimes get off. Mighty, it's awfu'!"

He crept away, shuddering a little, and Christina, leaving the paper lying on the floor, went slowly up the stairs. She now occupied alone the little room formerly the prerogative of the cook. Alice had given her a room to herself in order to inculcate in her that nice sense of personal reserve which she herself loved. Her rare power over those who served her was partly explained by the fact that she tried always to put herself in their place.

In her own little den every item of arrangement re-

mined her of her mistress's kind care and forethought. Christina stood still with her wrung hands folded before her, looking straight into space.

Although she had never been inside a jail on her own account, it had been in her youth a familiar enough place, occupying a large portion of her horizon. All those who had surrounded her in that sordid youth, had been familiar with it, and thought little of its terrors. But Teen herself had always thought of it with shame, and the picture of her mistress inside that great hostel of the lost moved her to an indescribable and impotent fury. She clenched her fist, her breath came in thick sobs.

"Oh, God, if you're no deid, send fire doo them!" she cried. "On the wretches that have dune this awfu' thing."

Out of her anguish presently the desire to help her mistress began to take shape. It did not take long: she was ever quick both to think and to act. She was for the time being no longer an inmate of the house with certain duties lying to her hand, but a champion of a great and crying wrong. She tossed off her house slippers, her apron and her cotton frock; threw on her black gown, her jacket and her hat, and descending the stairs left the house by the front door. She observed as she passed through the hall that the paper had been lifted, but there was no sound anywhere to indicate whether the ladies had come down.

Outside the fresh, crisp, frosty air met her, and somewhat revived her sinking heart. She had been up since six o'clock, and had tasted nothing. She did not hold with the morning tea which her fellow-servants required to brace them for their labours. She often jeered at them good-naturedly about it, they paying little heed. She felt a slight giddiness as she ran with fleet foot down to the bottom of the Square, where it opened by a little street into Buccleuch Place. In Buccleuch Place at that time Dr. Guthrie had his home. She knew the house well, often she had taken messages

to him from her mistress; also she knew the servant, who opened the door in answer to her knock.

"Is the doctor doon?" she inquired breathlessly.

The girl nodded.

"What's up? Ye look as if somebody was huntin' ye, lassie!"

"Set they are. Tell him, will ye, that Christina Caldwell wad like to see him, an' that it's a terrible thing that canna wait, though maybe he kens," she reflected, remembering that probably the morning paper was already in his hands.

At the moment the doctor himself opened the study door, and at sight of Christina waved her to come in. No explanation was necessary. She saw from his face that he was already in possession of the facts regarding the arrest of her mistress.

"Oh, sir," she cried, and he never forgot the shrill anguish of her voice. "Ye ken what they've dune. What can we dae to get her oot? You'll get her oot this very day, will ye no, ye help everybody?"

He regarded her distraught face with the deepest compassion.

"My dear girl, rest assured everything will be done. I knew of this last night. Mr. Marshall King came over late to tell me the whole story. They were at White's Moss with her, as the guest of their brother, and they all travelled with her yesterday to Edinburgh."

"But it's a lee, a horrid, wicked lee," she cried. "An' they micht ken it. Her kill Miss Dempster! She wadna hurt a flea!"

"We who know her best know that, Christina, and there is hope, great hope, for the future. Everything will be done. Mr. Marshall King himself is willing to spend half his fortune, he says, and the very best advice and counsel will be engaged."

But Christina listened with visible impatience.

"But she must get oot this very day. It'll kill her to be in the jail," she added, wringing her hands once

more. "I ken what like it is, though I never was in it. Look, Dr. Guthrie, whae brocht the lee forrit first?"

"The charge was lodged by Mrs. Dalgleish."

"Ay, but she's no at the bottom o'd," observed Christina shrewdly. "I could sweir it. She hasna gumption enough. It's a putten-up job, and I could name the naines too. But I've come to tell ye something o' what I saw," she added, with a queer little nod. "I've keepit dark all this time, what for I dinna ken. Can I tell you what I saw war nicht I watched them, Da'gleish an' the doctor, the nicht afore Miss Dempster deid?"

The doctor looked at her keenly. He had great experience of her class and kind, and knew that remembrance is not always to be placed on their statements, which are apt to be highly coloured to suit emergencies.

But there could be no harm in listening to the tale. He indicated that she might proceed, which she did, giving him in brief but graphic detail an account of that night's memorable proceedings.

The doctor listened intently, never taking his eyes for a moment off the girl's face. And he knew that she was speaking the truth.

"This is most valuable and interesting evidence, Christina," he said, when she had finished. "In fact, it may save your mistress. Will you be prepared to swear this upon your oath in the Court when you are called upon?"

"Wull I no? When will I gang, the day sometime, so's she can be let oot?" she said feverishly.

"No, no, nothing can be done for weeks, even months; the Court is not even sitting at present, and there are a great many preliminaries to be gone through first."

"Weeks or months? And do they keep her in jail a' the time?"

"I am afraid so, unless bail can be arranged; but it is not usual in so serious a case."

"Oh, it's awfu'; there's something faur, faur wrang wi' the law!" she cried, in blank indignation.

"It seems so to us at present, but try and be calm, my girl. Your mistress has influential and sympathetic friends who will leave no stone unturned to help and save her. Now, a word to you. You are anxious, I suppose, to serve her?"

"It's what I want to do. I'd dee' for her!" she said simply.

"Well, your best service for your mistress at the present moment is silence. Will you remember that, silence? Tell to none until the proper moment arrives what you have this day told me. You may leave it safely with me, relying that your evidence will be used at the proper moment. Will you remember, Christina, silence?"

She nodded, and put her finger to her lip.

"Come and see me again, and as often as you feel that you must speak to some one. I promise to let you know what is being done, and it may be your high privilege to speak the word in season that will turn the whole tide in your mistress' favour. Do you understand?"

Christina nodded again, and her face glowed.

"Something made me gang doon that night," she said simply. "Something was wrang, and I was bound to see it."

"Well, we needn't go back upon it," said the doctor. "It was one of these intuitions that come to us occasionally in life. Go back quietly to your duties, and remember that your mistress will expect you to be faithful. I will try and get you a glance of sceing her if it is at all possible."

She thanked him fervently and withdrew. As she entered the Square again the actuality of things was brought sharply home to her. There was a little crowd of riffraff gathered in the roadway before No. 84, and two policemen at the door.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE ARM OF THE LAW

AS Christina crossed the street the door was opened by William, who stood aghast and open-mouthed. The constables paid no heed to him, but marched in, and the door was about to close when Christina ran breathless up the steps. She had no innate fear of policemen; they had occupied a familiar place in the horizon of her troubled childhood; moreover, she was in a mood that for her mistress' sake would have defied the world.

She shut the door with a bang in the face of the gaping crowd, and stepped behind the policemen into the inner hall. By this time the two ladies had appeared, looking the picture of consternation and dismay. The man in superior dress addressed himself naturally to them.

"Sorry to trouble or inconvenience you, ma'am, but I have here a warrant to search the house." He took out the slip of paper from his pocket, and presented it to their terrified eyes, but they did not seem to comprehend. "It is more particularly the room in which Miss Dempster died that we wish to see," he explained, with a kind of patient good-humour, and not with any sign of arrogance or tyranny. The sight of the pale distraught faces of the ladies, not yet recovered from the awful shock of the newspaper announcement, inclined him to the gentlest dealing.

"I am almost a stranger in this house, sir, and I was

not here when Miss Dempster died," said Miss Cummings tremblingly. At this juncture Christina stepped forward.

"If you please, sir, my mistress left me in charge of the rooms," she said, with a quiet, fearless courage which filled Miss Cummings with astonishment. "If ye tell me what it is ye do want, I will try and show ye."

The officer turned to her with evident relief. He quickly saw that he would not be able to make much of the other two. In a glance he took the measure of the girl, as he might himself have expressed it, and his tone was conciliatory and even respectful to her. Then, now educated in the niceties of demeanour, was quite conscious that she had made a favourable impression. Arch-plotter as she was in the service of love, she determined not to lose the slight advantage she had gained.

"If it's Miss Dempster's room ye wish to see, sir, please step up the stair. The beds are not made, but you'll excuse that, bein' no nine o'clock in the mornin'."

Seeing Miss Cummings looking dismayed at the prospect of her private room being so unceremoniously entered, she parleyed a little further.

"This lady has bin sleeping in it. Maybe you'll let her rin up and put away some o' her things," she said insinuatingly. "An' I can show you the ither rooms, the library where Miss Dempster sat, and the desk she wrote at."

The man looked at the innocent dove-like face of Miss Cummings, and concluding that no great harm could be done in five minutes nodded, and indicated to Tean that they would follow her. She led them into the library, and there stood while they took details of the room, paying particular attention to the desk.

"You were in the house then when the old lady died?" said the officer suggestively to the girl. Mind-

ful of the injunction to silence just laid upon her by Dr. Guthrie, she instantly hardened her face, and only replied by a jerky nod.

"In what capacity did you serve her?" he asked, noting the girl's expression, even while appearing to be wholly engrossed with other details.

"I was the housemaid."

"And what are you now?"

"Maid to Miss Harman," she replied unwillingly as if the words were forced from her.

"Good service, eh?"

No answer.

"Miss Harman a good mistress?" he repeated, bending his brows rather severely upon her.

No answer still.

"What's the matter with you, eh?"

"Am I obliged to answer?" she asked desperately.

"Well, no; you're not in the witness-box, but it's as well to be civil, my bantam," he replied, but ceased from questioning her, though he decided she was worth the watching. "Do you think the old lady will have made her bed by now?"

"We can gang up an' see," said Teen ungraciously, and they ascended the stairs. She took them through the dressing-room, which the plain-clothes man studied with a practised and interested eye, deciding that the position of the rooms suggested many possibilities. As they came in Miss Cummings disappeared through the other door. She had only hastily spread up the bed; for the rest her habits were such that there was nothing to tidy away. The officer stood still, knitting his brows, and with note-book in hand took a long survey of the room. Then he turned to the girl.

"Is the room precisely as the old lady occupied it?"

"Yes; except that kist of drawers between the windows. There used to be a table."

"Ah, and the bed: is this the bed she died in?"

"Yes, but they're new curtains. Miss Harman cried

the other yins away to the washerwoman; they were near rotten anyway."

"I see." He took another comprehensive survey, and finally directed his attention to the cupboard. Stalking over he turned the handle.

"The key?" he said, holding up his hand expectantly.

"It's lost," replied the girl, stolidly. "It's been lost ever since Miss Dempster died."

"Oh, but it must be opened. Bring me a hammer and a chisel."

Teen hesitated a moment, as if loth to leave them alone. She knew not what sinister thing they might discover. The strain of an intolerable anxiety and torture was beginning to tell. But she gulped down the rising tide of helpless fear, telling herself she must be brave for her mistress' sake. She remembered that a tool box stood always in the box-room on the top landing, and there she found what they wanted. When she returned with the implements she found the officer leaning with his back against the cupboard door looking with apparent indifference into space. He took the tools from her hand, and the forcing of the lock was the work of a moment.

She pressed forward, feeling somehow that upon the contents of the cupboard serious issues might hang. She had often seen it open during the period of Miss Dempster's illness, but had attached no significance to the medicine bottles and what not standing confusedly on the shelves.

The detective lifted the things one by one, and when he came to the medicine-chest a peculiar gleam seemed to light up his stolid eyes.

"The bag, Smeaton," he said to the policeman.

Christina then observed that he had set a roomy black bag down in a corner. He opened it and carried it forward. Into this spacious receptacle the whole contents of the cupboard were placed, even to the medicine

glass and spoon, which had remained discoloured and unwashed all these months. It was easy to gather from the officer's manner that he regarded them as a valuable find.

"So, that's all, isn't it? Well, we can go. In the meantime it will perhaps be as well if the lady shifts her quarters: other visits may be necessary, and she looks as if she would be easily scared."

"I'll tell her," answered Christina, and there was a kind of desperate look in her face which struck the officer as curious.

"This is a bad business for your mistress, lass," he said, not unkindly. "She seems to have been a good mistress to you."

"Oh, the very best," cried the girl, with a shrill note of pain in her voice. "Tell me, how long will they keep her in the jail?"

The officer shook his head.

"That's more than I can tell you, my girl. It will be two or three months likely before the trial comes on."

"What?"

"Two or three months at least."

"An' will she hae to bide in the jail a' that time?"

He nodded.

"But them that's rich and clever will maybe get her out? There is a way, isn't there?"

"No; not when it's a case of murder."

"Whaever said, ay, or even hinted, that my mistress wad murder anybody is a murderer themselves, and a leear forbye," cried Teen, now quite carried away. "Oh, if I could but——"

Quite suddenly, and to the officer's intense surprise, she stopped short, and clapped her hand over her mouth. He nodded and winked at his companion.

"Quite right, lass; the least said's the soonest mended. Keep your spirits up. If your mistress is as innocent as you seem to think, she'll get off, never fear."

So saying they took their departure, taking another

careful survey of the dressing-room as they passed through it. Christina herself showed them out, and when the door closed she sank down on the settle and incontinently wept. Then William, the page-boy, vigorously dusting at a place well dusted before, came forward to comfort her.

"What is't, Teen? Are they ganna pit us a' in the jail?" he inquired in a scared voice. But Christina vouchsafed him no answer. The dining-room door opened then, and the two anxious faces of the little old ladies appeared. Genteel, well-bred gentlewomen, they had never come into contact with the sordid side of things, and the very name of policeman conjured up terrors before their mental vision.

The sight of Christina's abandonment, however, caused Miss Cummings to rush forward. Her own kind eyes were full of tears as her sympathetic hand dropped on the girl's shoulders.

"Hush, Christina, don't give way! We must all be brave for her sake," she said unsteadily. "Tell me, was it a severe ordeal upstairs? Perhaps, we ought to have come up to help you, instead of running away like cowards; but indeed Miss Drummond and I have scarcely recovered from the terrible shock of the newspaper yet."

"They didna need any help," said Christina, lifting her head and wiping her eyes. "It wasna that at a', it's the thocht o' her in the jail for twa or three months——"

"Two or three months! Impossible! Did they actually tell you that, Christina?"

"They did. The Coort's no sittin' ava' the now. Oh, it's terrible, an' there's nae justice let alone mercy in the hale world."

She rocked herself to and fro; the two old ladies wiped their eyes, William, in the background in the shadow of the eight-day clock, not seen, but bent on hearing everything, thrust his knuckles in his eyes too. Just

then the bell rang with a commanding peal. When Christina opened it the gaping crowd was still about the door, and Mr. Warburton, the lawyer, stood on the threshold.

"I was to meet Mr. Marshall King here. Has he come yet?" he asked quickly.

"Not yet, sir," replied Christina, in a low, composed voice; cheered by the sight of one she knew to be a friend of her mistress. Also the fact that a meeting had been arranged indicated that her friends, as well as her enemies, were active. She showed him into the library, and then going to the top of the kitchen stair called gently to William.

"Weelyum, get a bucket o' water, an' gang up the area steps, syne tell that gapin', impident crew that if it disna clear in ten seconds you dash it at them, see!"

William saw, and with a broad, delighted grin ran to do her bidding.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A GLEAM OF HOPE

WITHIN ten minutes a one-horse carriage rattled up to the door, and Marshall King alighted. The door opened before he had even sought admittance.

"Is Mr. Warburton here?"

"Yes, sir, in the library."

"Ah, you are Christina Caldwell, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Stop somewhere at hand; we may want you," he said as he proceeded to the library, where Warburton waited for him. They shook hands almost in silence.

"I thought we had better meet and arrange some programme before you proceeded to the jail. When will you be permitted to see Miss Harman?"

"This afternoon at half-past three. I have just come from the jail now. She will be formally charged this morning."

"Poor thing, poor thing, a monstrous miscarriage and travesty of justice, Mr. Warburton, don't you think?"

"Monstrous! but I think we shall be able to muster a very strong defence."

"We must; absolutely no stone must be left unturned nor any expense spared," said the Chamberlain, quickly and decisively. "I asked you to meet me here, because there may be some evidence obtainable in the house, I believe. Miss Harman told me to ask you to speak to the girl Christina Caldwell, who was much

with her, in close attendance, indeed, through the whole of the illness."

Warburton nodded.

"We will have her in presently. There is no doubt in my mind, Mr. King, that the Ruthvens are at the bottom of this. The woman Dalglish, now Mrs. Meikle, I believe, is merely a tool in their hands."

"My own view exactly," said King, with a nod. "A pair of unprincipled scoundrels. Such was the opinion I formed of them on Miss Dempster's funeral day. I should not be at all surprised though the crime, if a crime actually took place, should be traced to them."

Warburton faintly smiled.

"It would be a dramatic dénouement; but a lot of water must flow under the bridge before so happy a consummation can be reached. Miss Harman will have to lie in prison for eight or nine weeks at least."

"No possibility of bail?"

"Absolutely none. I made inquiry this morning on your suggestion of last night, but it will not be entertained. They will show her certain consideration, and permit her to see her friends, but that is all. We must abandon the idea of bail at once and concentrate our attention on more important matters."

Marshall King nodded.

"It can't be a long case; there are so few witnesses. When all the household available at the time of Miss Dempster's death are subpoenaed we shall then have only four all told. Of these two—Dalglish and Meikle—will be for the prosecution, in conjunction with the Ruthvens. The other servant, Grace Jervis, may or may not be neutral. It depends who has got a hold of her in the interval. Caldwell is on our side, and that practically is all the defence."

"They found traces of poison in the old lady's body, then, and have to find who put it there."

Warburton nodded.

"Sympathy will go with Miss Harman, but we shall

have to watch warily. The other side will be capable of anything."

"What about counsel?"

"I have thought of Letham."

"Very good; but much will depend on the Judge."

"Who may be the Lord-Justice-Clerk? I understand that Miss Harman has some slight acquaintance with him."

"She has, and I know him intimately. It would undoubtedly be an immense advantage to have him on the Bench. He sympathised with her in the other case, and passed some trenchant criticisms on the Ruthvengs at that time. They are wise to keep in the background, but this simulated reluctance need deceive nobody. It's part of the game."

"Precisely. Well, we shall have the girl Caldwell in and hear what she has to say, also to give her a word of warning, for others will be at her, and she must understand that it is necessary to hold her tongue."

He rang the bell, and Christina, no farther than the outer hall, answered it instantly. She did not seem nervous or uneasy, though her colourless face and shadowed eyes indicated the strain under which she was labouring. Warburton regarded her kindly. It was Marshall King who spoke.

"I saw your mistress yesterday, my girl, and I bring you a message from her."

"Yes, sir," she said, in a breathless voice.

"She asks you to look after the horse, attend to the comfort of the ladies, and do your duty as you would to her."

"But did she say anything about herself? Oh, sir, who is she?" she cried in a voice of anguish they never forgot.

"She is as well as we can expect. Mr. Warburton here is to see her this afternoon. I daresay he may be able to procure you an interview with her."

"Ah, I would like that; but will she no get oot?"

"Never, until she leaves the prison for good. Meanwhile we know that you are one with us in our desire to serve her."

Christina nodded violently, but did not trust her voice.

"You will be called as a witness, as the principal witness, and Mr. Warburton will prepare you, as it were, to give your evidence. Could you tell us here and now any particulars regarding the illness of your late mistress?"

The girl looked round a trifle wildly.

"Dr. Guthrie said I was to hold my tongue."

Warburton nodded.

"He was right, but you are on our side," observed Warburton kindly. "Remember that it is the whole truth we want. Miss Harman is prepared to abide by that test. Did you see anything suspicious or unusual during Miss Dempster's illness?"

Christina looked straight and solemn at their grave faces, as if seeking once more to test their integrity.

"Am I to tell all I ken, and will it help her?" she asked simply.

"Certainly. We have to prepare a defence!"

She understood, and, without more ado, related in her own brief, concise, graphic way the incidents of her midnight vigil in the dressing-room of the dying woman.

As she proceeded Marshall King became visibly excited, and finally interrupted.

"Do you mean to say you saw Dr. Ruthven deliberately put something into the medicine-chest?"

"Yes, sir; something rolled in blue paper. He took it out of his pocket, and I saw him put it in the box and shut the lid and syne lock the press."

Warburton and Marshall King exchanged glances.

"You are sure you made no mistake?"

"None. If ye come up the stair I'll show ye exactly what happened."

They rose with one accord, and proceeded in varying degrees of excitement upstairs. There Christina, warning to her theme, gave a fresh and dramatic recital of the night's proceedings, showed the arrangements in the dressing-room, and the exact spot where she had seen Dr. Ruthven stand with the medicine-chest in his hands. Both men betrayed by the rigid closeness of their attention what importance they attached to the evidence. They were convinced of her sincerity, and the very bald simplicity of her recital carried proof with it.

"Does Miss Harman know all this?" asked Warburton suddenly.

"Nae o'd. Often I've been gaun to tell her. At first I was feared, because I kent she wad be angry at me for spyin' on them. I couldna help it; something made me do it. Then after a while it was nae use, as everything was a' richt."

Warburton, who had been taking copious notes, stopped and looked at her.

"Could you write an account of this down to the minutest detail just as you have spoken it to us?"

"Yes; but the writin' wadna be very good. Miss Harman was makin' me practise every day, and I was gettin' on fine afore Christmas," she said, with a catch in her voice. "I'll dae my best."

"I'll send you some paper, and you will write it and sign it, and be careful that you forget nothing."

"On, I winna. Will it be of use? Will it help her?" she inquired, with a return to her painful eagerness of appeal.

"Rather. Do you know that this may save your mistress? You have given us all hope we did not possess an hour ago. I shall be able to cheer her when I see her this afternoon."

Christina remained silent a moment with a hesitating look on her face. They waited patiently for her to express herself. The despised child of the gutter had all at once become a person of first importance.

"There's something else," she said at length. "That Dr. Gardiner, that Dr. Ruthven brocht to see Miss Dempster. He said he was Professor Gardiner from the College. It was a lee. He lives at Rankeillour Street. In ye gang round you'll see his place."

Immense surprise, even incredulity, was stamped upon their faces.

"What you say seems incredible. Are you sure?"

"Quite, he's a guid doctor, but maistly drunk. A'boddy in the Pleasance kens him. They ca' him Drouthy Davie."

The two men once more exchanged astonished and significant glances.

"This at least is easily verified. I know the real Professor Gardiner very well, and can easily ask him whether he was called in consultation for Miss Dempster," observed King.

Warburton nodded, and, closing his notebook, looked steadily at Christina Caldwell.

"I wish to impress upon you, my girl, that you are the most important witness in this case—in fact, the only one. I wish I could shut you up till the day of the trial."

Christina did not even smile.

"I can haud my tongue if you mean that," she said quietly. "I promised Dr. Guthrie, and noo I promise you."

"Very well. You love your mistress, I believe. Remember that you alone have the power to save her. Speak to none, no matter who may question you—and doubtless many will. Keep silence until the appointed time."

She nodded understandingly.

"I've kent all this for near a twelvemonth, and never breathed it till this mornin' to Dr. Guthrie."

There was no more to be said.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE HOUR OF NEED

IT was a cruel and searching experience for Alice Harman to open her eyes upon the narrow walls of a prison cell.

After a troubled and restless night, she awoke and looked round perplexedly, for the moment at a loss to remember where she was. Then the whole hideous truth rushed upon her, and she moaned aloud. For a brief space hope fled, leaving her in the depths of despair. It seemed to her such a monstrous thing that she who had never in her whole four-and-twenty years of life so much as wished ill to a human being should suffer with the vilest.

Little wonder that her whole being rose in revolt against the frightful injustice. It seemed to her so palpably impossible that any one could for a moment believe her guilty of such a dark and useless crime, for what object was there in hastening the old lady's death when all the property had already been safely willed to her? She was aghast at the fatuousness of those who had entertained the story and were now trying to push it to its conclusion.

After a time of battling with the darkest thoughts of which human nature is capable, some strength and clearness of vision slowly returned to her, and she was able to bring some order out of the chaos.

She realised that the thing would have to be fought to the bitter end, and she marshalled in her mind all

the facts she could gather which could be used as evidence to refute that upon which she had been arrested and would be tried.

She knew her friends would not remain inactive, though they could do little to alleviate the misery of her lot. The chief and most comforting remembrance was that of the man who had sworn to stand by her, who loved her, and would love her through all.

She was quite composed when the wardress brought her her meagre breakfast. She was a hard-featured woman, with a short, abrupt manner, but her face and demeanour both softened as she looked on the fair beauty of her who was in every way different from the usual outcasts of society with whom she came in contact in the performance of her sordid duties.

Alice bade her a quiet good-morning, and, though her feelings rose in disgust at what stood upon the little tray, she made some attempt to eat it, remembering that mental strength largely depended upon physical strength, which had to be upheld solely from without.

She was informed that at ten o'clock she would be required to attend the Court to be formally charged before the presiding baillie.

This was quite welcome news to the girl, who preferred any movement to the slow torture of her own thoughts, confined within these narrow walls.

Accordingly at ten a cab came within the precincts of the prison, and she was driven off to the sharp turning of the North Bridge and thence up to the High Street and Parliament Square.

It was a very brief and formal proceeding; she was simply charged, pleaded not guilty, and informed that she would be permitted to consult with her solicitor that very afternoon concerning her defence.

The baillie was one John Pitcairn, a corn chandler, well known to the Kings, who did considerable business with Traquair. He was quite well known to Alice, who had seen him more than once at the Kings' house.

But no word of recognition passed between them, though the bailie's glance was one of infinite compassion and even astonishment.

He showed his practical sympathy by making the proceedings as short as possible, and within the hour Alice was once more being driven within the gateway of the Calton Jail.

Shortly after three o'clock that afternoon the door of her cell opened to admit Warburton. She sprang up, and extended her hand with an expression of relief which was almost painful.

Warburton himself, the most kindly of men, was almost unmanned at the sight of her, but managed to control his feelings, realising that this was a time for action and not for emotion.

But the very effort to control himself gave a kind of jerky stiffness to his manner and words which surprised Alice.

"We need not speak about 'this awful thing, Miss Harman: indeed, it will not bear speaking of," he began hastily. "What I am here for, is simply to assure you that everything will be done, that all the machinery for your defence has been set in motion this very day, and that we will not relax our efforts between this and April."

"April!" she repeated, with wide-open eyes and quick breath. "Why April?"

"The trial will not come on, I am afraid, until the first of April or the very last days of March."

"And this is January, and I shall have to stay here all these terrible months! God, how cruel men can be with their laws, even to the innocent and the guilty alike."

Warburton made no reply. He had none ready. The fact had to be accepted, that was all. She recovered herself quickly, however, and began to take an interest in what he had come to say.

"It is a long time to wait, but the delay may be

valuable even," he said, trying to speak cheerfully. "I have been at George Square all the morning with Mr. King, and we have got together already an astonishing amount of valuable information as evidence—from whom, think you?"

"There is nobody there except my maid, Christina Caldwell, who would give any evidence. The rest of the servants are new to the house."

"Well, Christina has given it. She has had concealed in her mind since the time of Miss Dempster's death a most extraordinary story. Let me tell it to you."

Alice listened intently while he went briefly over the evidence just placed in his hands by Christina Caldwell.

"I am not so very much surprised," she said, when he concluded. "And what you tell me explains several things about Christina I have never been able to understand. It is an extraordinary story, and I know it is true. She does not tell lies. I have found her to be most truthful and honest, and I am sure that this which she has kept from me has been a burden on her mind. But the question is, will truth be strong enough to conquer lies? Those who were capable of bringing this charge against me will stick at nothing."

"The lie differs from the truth in this, Miss Harman, that there is always the one weak spot, and the counsel we think of engaging will find that weak spot, and track it down like a sleuth-hound. He is far and away the cleverest man we have in the profession at the moment. He'll dissect a witness with the artistic precision of a surgeon."

"Tell me about them at home," said Alice suddenly. "Poor Miss Cummings! Is she dreadfully upset?"

"She is. Christina Caldwell is the mainstay of the house, Miss Harman, and so long as she remains there everything will go well."

"She will stay until I give her leave to go," said Alice quietly. "Shall I be allowed to see her?"

"Yes, to-morrow. I will arrange it. I think we

shall be able to get you a little extension of privilege in the matter of visitors. King and his wife will be in at all hazards."

Alice smiled a little. Already the horizon was brightening. The sure knowledge that there were strong and loving agencies at work on her desperate case banished the gloom and despair to which she had been a prey an hour ago.

"I want to see Christina first. It's her due. To-morrow, if possible."

"To-morrow for certain," he assured her, and it came to pass that at the same hour the next day Christina Caldwell presented herself at the porter's lodge at the Calton Jail armed with an order for admission.

From the very beginning there had been sympathy in the prison for Alice, and she received as much kind attention as was legitimately allowed. Before she had left that gloomy place she had won them all and endeared herself to all with whom she came in contact. No more fervent prayers for her deliverance were uttered than within the precincts of the prison.

When Christina was ushered into the little cell, where her beloved mistress sat on the edge of her camp bed writing a letter, she incontinently burst into tears.

Alice, her own eyes not dry, laid her hand kindly on the girl's shoulder.

"Come, Christina, you must come to cheer me, not to cry over me," she said, with a little attempt at gaiety which smote the girl to the heart.

"It's like to kill me," she said, with a great gulp. "As I said to Weelyum yesterday, God must be dead."

"Oh, not yet," said Alice. "Not yet. We must hope and pray that somewhere He is watching over me, and that He will yet deliver me from this horrible pit."

Teen could think of nothing to say, though thoughts lay upon her heart like a deep flood. But her silence was not misunderstood, and though they parted within an hour, having said very little one to the other, yet

both were comforted. Alice had heard all the little details about the house, and gave some further and more explicit directions for Christina's conduct of the same, when the wardress knocked at the door. Then poor Teen broke down afresh. Alice, forgetful of the gulf between them, and only conscious, ay, and deeply grateful, for the unspeakable devotion of that faithful heart of gold, bent forward and kissed her as she turned to go. There was an awestricken and uplifted look on the girl's face as she went out into the crisp winter day, and she seemed to walk on air.

"She kissed me," she said over and over to herself, and that kiss only served to bind the bonds of love and service more firmly about her heart.

Two days later other and quite unexpected visitors were admitted to the prison. Alice was reading one of the books her friends had been permitted to supply her with, when the tones of a voice smote upon her ear and filled her with amazement. For unless her ears strangely deceived her, it was the voice of her old friend, Harriet O'Brien. And sure enough, the door opened immediately, and her broad, kindly face appeared, like a messenger of hope in the doorway.

The next moment Alice was folded in that ample embrace, and on the breast that had mothered her in many an hour of need she sobbed out something of the passion of her soul.

"Now we're to be done with the tears, my dear, for there's nothing to cry about," said the good, motherly soul presently, as she put the girl away from her and looked her over from head to foot. "It's a case for bad language if you like, and there's been a good deal of it flying about Colchester since we read it in the papers. When I got your letter I said to the Colonel, 'My place is with her, poor girl,' and here I am to stay until the ghastly business is over. If it won't hurt you too much, my dear, would you mind telling me a little more about it, so that I can understand how

it is that your mother's own country can use you so ill."

So the friends, the good hearts and true, rallied round the forlorn prisoner in the Calton Jail, and with their constant ministrations did much to alleviate the terrible position and circumstances in which Alice Hayman had been placed.

CHAPTER XXXV

AT THE CROSS ROADS

OUT Gilmerton way, at a junction where four roads met, Mr. and Mrs. Meikle had taken up their abode at the Cross-Roads Inn. It was an extremely ugly and desolate-looking house, which had a somewhat evil reputation, a former tenant having committed suicide there under peculiarly tragic circumstances. All-luck had so persistently attended the house that at last no one could be persuaded to take it or live in it.

The Meikles came on the scene at an opportune moment for themselves, and by dint of appearing indifferent and reluctant managed to drive a very good bargain. Ruthven, senior, carried through the little business for them satisfactorily, and the house, being swept and garnished, was opened with a flourish of trumpets. It ought to have been a successful place of call, commanding as it did three important roads and one minor one, and Mrs. Dalgleish determined to leave no stone unturned to achieve success. She made a comely enough landlady. On the suggestion of old Ruthven, who assured her she made herself old before her time, she removed the respectable but unbecoming middle-aged cap, and put up her still abundant hair neatly. It made a marvellous change—in fact, any one who saw her for the first time scarcely recognised her.

They were thankful to get into their own house early in February. Edinburgh was getting very hot for them since the talk about the charge they had brought against

Miss Harman, at the instigation and under the instructions of the Ruthvens, and they were pleased to be even a short distance out of ~~the~~ town before the further excitement and strain of the ~~trial~~ should begin. They had been obliged to change their lodgings twice in the interval to get peace from prying neighbours and others who were not neighbours, and as the duty of silence had been strictly enjoined on them likewise they were glad to escape. The slight notoriety already attached to their name was such as to be useful to them in their public business, and they entered into possession at the Cross Roads full of hope and pleasurable anticipation. They decided to mark the great event by giving a free glass of beer to every patron that day, and it seemed as if some little bird had whispered the good news, not only to every carter and carrier who had ever known the Cross Roads Inn as a place of call, but to innumerable other thirsty souls who took the long walk with the vision of the free drink at the end of it.

Mrs. Meikle was slightly dismayed, and when the third barrel was tapped wanted to call a halt, but Meikle, less narrow-minded and more enterprising, continued to serve it with every appearance of goodwill until the day began to wane.

About five o'clock in the afternoon, the day being a fine, mild, spring-like one, when the breath of the newly upturned ground was sweet and pungent in the nostrils, Christina Caldwell, walking with ~~calm~~, measured tread out the Gilmerton Road, came within sight of the Cross Roads Inn. In common with many others she had heard of the notice of the opening of the inn, and the inauguration of what they hoped would be a flourishing trade. She did not come, however, to sample the free drinks, being a strict teetotaler, but to have some speech with the Meikles, whom she had several times tried to get a hold of in Edinburgh, but without success.

She was enjoying her walk, the freshness of the spring

air, and the indescribable joy and freedom of the open; something indefinite but powerful seemed to stir in her veins, and to uplift her soul from its heaviness. She felt, but did not understand, that it was only the kinship of youth with spring, and the shrill long trill of the lark somewhere high in the dappled sky awakened a responsive thrill. She was a child of the city, and had little knowledge of country ways or life; this was absolutely her first walk clean beyond the environs of Edinburgh. She was intoxicated by the experience, her limbs knew no weariness, she felt as if she could have walked on and on to the very limits of the world. But presently a long line of carts before a roadside house suggested to her that her destination was in immediate view.

A brand-new sign painted in gaudy red and blue swung gently in the soft breeze, and there was an air of newness and importance about the whole place which left her in no doubt.

These trying and interminable weeks had left their mark upon the girl, whose faithful heart adhered to her mistress with more than an ordinary love and devotion. Her face had lost its round contour, the ruddy colour had gone from her cheeks, her fine eyes had a new beauty, that of wistful appeal.

In common with many others throughout the civilised world, Christina had rebelled against the vast and ponderous machinery of the law, which moves at such a snail's pace, hampered by a thousand immovable formalities which crucify the sinner ten times over by cruel suspense before the fiery trial of the last ordeal.

She had tried to reason it out in her simple, blunt way, but without success, and now, not resigned, but only dumb, she waited for the time of fierce searching; but specially for her own opportunity at the trial, now definitely fixed to open at the High Court of Justiciary on the first day of April.

During the interval she had kept that silence enjoined upon her by those to whom the interests of her mistress

were not less dear. She had some vague idea of still further helping her mistress by coming face to face with the Meikles. Anyhow, she had been inwardly moved to take this journey, and as there was none to hinder her she had found her way. As she approached the door some of the vehicles moved away, and only a few loungers were left in the bar.

Now, Christina had marked out a certain course for herself, being of opinion that all is fair in love and war. Her ethics were still those of the primeval state, and if she had been reproved or asked to put her defence in words, she might have replied that you only fight the devil with his own weapons, or words to that effect. Such was the attitude in which she approached the inn, in considerable doubt as to her probable reception, but undaunted, and determined to make the endeavour which some strange combination of thoughts had suggested to her. The atmosphere of plotting and cross-examination having become familiar to her, her intention was really to do a little amateur detective work on her own account.

Although there was no woman about, either outside the house or in the bar, she walked in boldly. Mrs. Meikle, resplendent in a new gown of grey wincey, and an ample white apron with a neat lace collar, fastened by a huge gold brooch in which was an extraordinary portrait of Meikle, with highly painted red cheeks and china-blue eyes, was dispensing beer and mother-wit at the same time to the remnant of her customers.

She was in her element. Christina stood still in wonderment at the change in the woman, thinking how young and even comely she was. And at that moment Mrs. Meikle turned her eyes in the direction of the door and beheld the face of her old fellow-servant. She gave a visible start. Watching keenly, the amateur detective observed that for some reason or another her appearance was disconcerting to the landlady. Her ruddy colour even paled, and she stopped short in the middle

of a sentence and smiled a faint, sickly smile. But presently making an effort to recover herself, she nodded in recognition.

"Holloa, Teen, this is an unexpected pleasure surely! A perfect sight for sair een."

"I thoct I'd tak' a walk an' see ye in your new hoose," replied Teen, in a casual, indifferent voice, immensely reassuring to Mrs. Meikle. "But as you're so busy I'll no stop."

"Indeed, an' ye will," said Mrs. Meikle, with great good humour. "Come into the back room. My guid-man an' me's been waitin' or they ca' a halt to get oor ain tea. You'll tak' a cup, for it's a long walk frae Edinburgh, though a heap o' oor freens havena thoct muckle o'd the day," she added slyly, whereat her customers, knowing she was poking fun at them about the free drinks, roared delightedly.

She stepped back from the bar, and presently Teen heard herself called from the passage, where a door led into the back room, furnished comfortably as a parlour, intended for the Meikles' own use, or for occasional hospitality to a favoured customer. They had planned it all out well, and though niggardly and grasping enough regarding money had realised that a cert' amount must be spent before any return can be obtained.

Everything was neat and new and good, and Christina came to the conclusion that they were a great deal more comfortable than they deserved.

"Well, wha wad hae thoct o' seein' you, lass?" began Mrs. Meikle, who had rapidly decided to take the girl's visit as a personal and friendly one, and shame her if possible by kindness. She was perfectly well aware that such was not Teen's object. She knew her devotion to Alice Harman, but could not tell, of course, how much or how little she knew regarding her own part in the tragedy looming in the distance.

"Meikle'll be as pleased as ye like when he sees ye."

He often speaks about the guld hoose an' oor life there. A bonnie change is this. Did ye see the advertisement in the *Courant*? I suppose ye did."

"Yes, I did," admitted Christina; "that's hoo I kent whaur to come. Ye seem to be very busy."

"The free drinks! It's a mercy it was only for the wan day; but when they've sampled the ale, maybe they'll come back, and so we'll get paid for what I must say seems a terrible wastry. An' hoo are ye yoursel'?"

"Oh, a' richt. Ever see Jervis noo, Mrs. Meikle?"

"No me; she's aboot Glesca in a situation. I never liket her, a smooth-faced cat. That's the worst o' service, ye canna get away frae your neebors though ye should hate them like poison. Are ye fairly comfortable, the noo?"

"Oh, yes, a' richt," replied Christina, and while Mrs. Meikle poured out the tea she dropped her eyes down, for she felt it was mean to break bread in a house she despised and distrusted.

There was a moment's strained silence.

"Nae ither news, I suppose?" said Mrs. Meikle suggestively, as she poised her saucer on her palm and drank her tea—a mannerism which Teen well remembered in the kitchen at George Square.

"No, nane."

"Still at George Square, are ye?"

"Oh, yes, and likely to be; I'll never leave her," she answered simply.

"Maybe it's a mistake, lass." Rats leave the sinking ship, and it's everyboudy's duty to look out for theirsels. If ye like I can speak for ye. In the West End I ken a guid place as tablemaid whaur ye wad get eighteen pound a year."

"I'm no seekin' it," said Teen stolidly. "I'm quite pleased whaur I am."

Mrs. Meikle gulped down another mouthful, and then spoke words which almost took Christina's breath away.

"Terrible business this, isn't it? As I said to Meikle;

though I never liket the lassie, it's hard to believe that she could actually make away wi' Miss Dempster. It's a horrid business to be maked up wi', especially for folk in a public way. The warst o'd is that wi' the law ye've nae say. Ye've to gang when they bid ye."

"If you're so ill at it, what wey did ye set the thing gaun?" inquired the girl bluntly.

"Me! It wasna me, no, nor Meikle. Naebody kens preceesely wha begood it first. Of course there was mair nor me kent everything wasna strait an' even-forrit in the hoose. I wad advise ye, Teen, in your an interest, to clear oot afore the trial. It'll be bad for you ony wey ye like to tak' it."

"She'll get off," observed Teen in a low, somewhat uncertain voice, as she rose to her feet. "That's wan thing I ken. Hae ye seen the doctor lately?"

Mrs. Meikle virtuously shook her head.

"No me. His father has been Meikle's man o' business, gettin' the lease signed and so on, but I've seen naething o' them. Ye needna glower at me, lass, as if ye thocht I was pitting a rope aboot your mistress's neck. Hae ye never heard the auld sayn' that murder will oot? Well, if it was murder, the yin that d' it will be brocht to book, and if it wasna you nor me the mair thankful we should be."

Teen rose hastily unable to bear any more, and, with a muttered good-bye, took her departure as unceremoniously and unexpectedly as she had come. Her visit had had no result except to harrow feelings already sufficiently painful.

As she left the front door of the inn a cab drove up the road, and she obtained a passing glimpse of the occupant as he alighted. She was in no way surprised to behold old Ruthven the lawyer.

She almost groaned as she walked away with down-beat head.

The place was a place of ill omen, over which the spirit of mischief brooded. Altogether that was a very

dark day for poor Christina. The virtue of patience was not hers. She wondered as she walked battling against the wind that had risen in a gusty blow how she would be able to support her existence during the days and weeks which must intervene before the actual trial should begin.

CHAPTER XXXVI

'THIEVES' COUNSEL

MRS. MEIKLE had returned to the bar, but when her fresh visitor arrived she hastened out to bid him enter the back parlour.

"Well, Mrs. Meikle, how's business? Doing a roaring trade, evidently from external signs," he said, in his usual facetious manner. "Had a good inauguration?"

"They've polished off plenty guid ale onyway," she answered. "What will ye tak', sir, to hansel the hoose?"

"Oh, a good stiff whisky. Where's Meikle?"

"Lookin' after the beer," she answered, with a slightly sly smile. "I'm very prood to see ye, sir, and I hope you'll often tak' a walk oot to the Cross Roads."

"It's a good stiff walk; I doubt too far for my old bones. I've driven to-day. Well, here's good luck not only to the house, but to all our undertakings. Now, tell me, what was that jade doing here?"

"Ye mean Teen Caldwell, I suppose? Did ye meet her?"

"Just saw her passing as she came out of this house. I didn't know you were on friendly terms."

"Neither did I; an' we're no," she answered calmly.

"It was news Teen was seekin', an' news she didna get, though she maybe heard mair than she bargained for."

"But you were very careful, Mrs. Meikle? I don't like that g'rl, never did; she's both sly and deep, as deep as they make 'em. What 'd she want? Please be explicit. Every item, however unimportant it may look, matters in these times and in this business."

"She wantit naething as far as I could mak' bot, an' she said very little. She said she was out for a daunder, and thocht she would come as faur as the Cross Roads and hansel the hoose, which she did in a guid cup o' tea. I dinna think there's that muckle ill in her, and she disna look weel; she's fell changed."

"Depend upon it she was put up to it by some of them. She's not that kind of girl Mrs. Meikle. She's a deep plotter, I could lay you a sovereign. But you were very careful?" he repeated. "She's the kind that can make a mountain out of a molehill, an' put two and two together with surprising cleverness; a dangerous person, in fact. My son agrees with me that she's worth the watching. If we'd only one ally in the house it would have been better for us, but they're all under that jade's thumb."

"She's a clever yin," observed Mrs. Meikle. "V'eel, have you ony news?"

"Some of a sort. They're leaving no stone unturned, and the case will be a record of the times. The latest I heard to-day accidentally from a chap that does occasional errands for Warburton. He's expecting to feather his nest over this business. I can tell you whoever has the bill of costs to pay will squirm over it. Well, it seems the case is to be judged by the Lord-Justice-Clerk, and that he's a personal friend of Miss Harnan's. Don't look well, does it?"

"I dinna see what it makes much difference," observed Mrs. Meikle indifferently. "It's the jury that settles it, isn't it, an' if we can be strong enough to convince them, what can the Judge dae?"

Ruthven did not argue the point, which had caused him considerable uneasiness. He had called on his son

in the first instance, but found him out, and had then come on to the Cross Roads Inn.

"It'll make a difference which I can't explain to you. It makes it all the more necessary that we should make our evidence as expert and sweeping as possible. You've taken my advice, I hope, and jotted down any little occurrences that have returned to your mind, and you'll try and get it into one clear connected story in your mind before the time comes?"

"Oh, yes, I'm no feared. I'll maybe stagger some o' them yet," she said, with a touch of assurance which, however, Ruthven did not particularly like. He had observed a change in Mrs. Meikle of late, the arrogance of success and the importance of her new estate were beginning to bear, their usual fruit. He would have preferred the old Dagleish to deal with, and for many reasons he, like Christina, would fain have hastened the eventful day.

"I can't too strongly impress upon you the necessity of being prepared. When it gets nearer the time I'll come out, and we'll have a kind of mock trial. I'll put you through your facings, and prepare you for the searching cross examination which has bamboozled many a clearer head than yours, Mrs. Meikle."

"A' richt. They'll maybe find I'm a match for them," she said grimly. Then suddenly she lowered her voice and looked at him sideways.

"Meikle's been wonderin' whether a pairt at least o' the money ye promised couldna be paid before the trial? Look at the expense we've been at here, and it'll be a while afore much comes in. A hunder pounds wouldna be amiss, Maister Ruthven."

Now two hundreds pounds had been promised to the Meikles by Ruthven on condition that they set the rumours afloat and finally lodged a complaint against Miss Harman with the Fiscal. This in order to keep their names out of it in the first instance at least. The first part of the programme Mrs. Meikle, when Mrs. Dal-

gleish, had faithfully carried out, industriously spreading a few suggestive and sinister rumours and hints in the teeming neighbourhood where she had lodged with her sister-in-law. She had succeeded quickly enough in making George Square notorious, No. 84 being singled out for the morbid attention of the busybodies and ne'er-do-weels, who, like carrion, scent a tragedy afar off. Life in Miss Dempster's house had indeed become well-nigh intolerable to its inmates by reason of this continuous espionage, which had soured even the placid temper of Christina, and turned the good-natured William into a roaring lion, for ever on the area steps brandishing a broom or aiming sundry unsavoury missiles at the head of the spies. All this had the faithful and docile Dugleish performed with the two hundred pounds in view, and now she was getting a bit anxious to see the colour of Ruthven's money. She had no real respect for him, having been convinced that he was a rogue, who would stick at nothing to serve his own ends.

Ruthven, quick as a needle, saw that it would not be well to put her off any longer with an indefinite promise.

"That was part of my business to-day," he said, fumbling in his pocket, from which he presently drew a thick pocket-book. "I'll give you a cheque for fifty pounds to-day. Will that do for a week or so? Before the first of April I'll pay the other fifty. Of course the second hundred must lie over till after the trial, and will depend on how you acquit yourself there."

"An' if it gangs against us maybe I'll never see it?" she said, with rather a gloomy air.

"Yes, you will. I'm not dishonest enough to visit on you consequences you couldn't avoid," he said suavely. "Shall I make this cheque payable to you or to Meikle?"

"Oh, to me. I'm the bank in this concern. Meikle canna look efter money," her eyes glowing as she watched the rapid flow of the pen over the precious

little slip. Dalgleish was a real miser. You could tell it by her handling of money and by the wolfish way in which she grasped the cheque which Ruthven offered.

"I've made it payable to you both, and it'll require both signatufes," he said. "And don't belittle Meikle, man; it won't pay. Let it be seen that he's the head of the house, and you'll get better custom," he said, offering the only bit of disinterested advice within his remembrance. He felt a strong dislike and aversion to the woman as he rose, and once more realised the humiliation of sharing any responsibility with her.

She took the rebuke with astonishing quietude, in fact, she never said a word.

"I want to see Meikle before I go," said Ruthven then; "where is he?"

"Oot in the shed at the back among the beer barrels," she replied, with a slightly vicious touch. "Coontin' them; I believe he's feared they rin awa'."

"Well, I'll see him as I go by. Here's good luck to the house once more, and good luck to ourselves. Only be prudent and careful, and keep your mouth shut, and we've nothing to fear."

He knew the premises well, and instead of leaving the house by the front door stalked through the kitchen to the yard behind, where a small barn had been converted into a regular liquor store. And there he found Meikle with his shirt sleeves rolled up, arranging the barrels to suit his fancy. He wiped the sweat from his brow as Ruthven's shadow darkened the doorway, and stepped back with a slight smile.

"I daresay you're busy, friend?" said the lawyer jocosely. "A goodly stock. How long do you think it'll take the drouthy ones to get through all that--three deep, aren't they?"

"Aye. They've been hard at it a' day," said Meikle doubtfully. "I doubt it was a mistake the free-drink business. Michty ve wad think the bellman had been

sent round; they've never haltit since aicht o'clock this mornin'."

"It's a grand hansel for the house, Meikle, and you'll get it all back, never fear. I've been inside, and it's a credit to you and your good wife. You'll do well here, Meikle, and I shouldn't wonder if after the trial you don't do better. You see there'll be a certain fame achieved by your propinence in such a celebrated case."

"I havena much to dae, for I saw very little," observed Meikle, scratching his head. "It's the mistress they'll need to pump. If a' she says is true she could hang a dizen; but she has a gey long tongue, Maister Ruthven. She speaks faur mair noo, than she did at George Square, and no half as muckle sense."

"She's a bit swelled up with pride and what not at present, having gotten a man and a fully licensed house all at once. It's too much for the weaker vessel," said Ruthven facetiously. "You'll need to assert yourself a bit, friend, and not let her get the mastery. It's all as you begin, you know."

"Oh, ay, I ken that. I'm jist lettin' her get a bit rope the noo, but I'll wauken up one o' these days, and let her ken I'm the landlord of the Cross Roads Inn."

"That's right. You'll never regret it nor will she. I've been giving her a word about that and other things. I think she'll keep quiet, but you must keep a watch on her, Meikle, and don't let her tongue get loosed in that bar. There's plenty that'll try her there, especially later on, when the public interest is roused a bit. We're working hard, but it's going to be a ticklish business. You'll help us all you can when the time comes?"

"Oh, yes, I'll dae what I can. What about the money, Maister Ruthven? Rebecca was speakin' about it this very day."

"I've given her a cheque for fifty pounds to-day, made out in both your names, and you'll have the rest before the first of April."

Meikle's face visibly brightened, and his attitude

towards the lawyer became distinctly more cordial. The interview was not prolonged, however, and leaving the premises by the yard gate Ruthven signalled to the cab still waiting for him, and drove rapidly back to town, getting down at the beginning of Nicolson Street.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE LAST OBSTACLE

THINGS had taken a turn with Patrick Ruthven, and business was beginning to flow into the modest Nicolson Street surgery.

There is no accounting for these things. Success will attend a man or sometimes desert him, with all the caprice and unexpectedness of a coquette. It might be that a certain notoriety consequent upon the will trial had acted as a fruitful advertisement. Anyhow, he had no need to complain any longer of long tedious hours spent in a dreary room waiting on the patients who did not come.

He was engaged with someone when he heard his father's key in the door. Knowing he had been out at the Cross Roads, he did not keep the patient so long as usual, and, having dismissed him, came into the dining-room.

"Well, what are they like out there?" he asked, with rather a keen glance at the old man's face. That face was a fairly good barometer regarding luck or the reverse. Pat could read it like an open book.

"Oh, they're doing a roaring trade, the mistress in the bar and Meikle in the barn counting the barrels that they're emptying as fast as they can. They'll do less the morn, maybe," he added, dryly, "But they are well pleased like, and will do well, being thrifty folk. Keen eye to the main chance. I met that lassie Caldwell well as I went in."

"Caldwell! What was she doing there? Spying the land or what?"

"Making a call on her old neighbour. Mrs. Meikle didn't seem to appreciate the compliment, and said she gave her but short cuttings. But Mrs. Meikle can't be trusted any farther than you can see her. She's a windbag and a blethering skate just. I was telling Meikle he'd need to keep her in better order. I for one will be glad when the whole ghastly business is over."

"Does Mrs. Meikle know her part?"

"She thinks she does, but I've a lot more to do with her yet before she's ready for the witness-box. I'm sorry that Caldwell saw me to-day, Pat. The less we are in evidence the better it will be for us."

"But surely it is permissible for you as their legal adviser to pay a casual visit."

"Oh, yes; in ordinary circumstances, but I don't like her, and I didn't like to see her there. And the other side is keeping too quiet. It's not a good sign."

"You're always on the creaking side, guy," observed Patrick, airily. "If you had as much to do as yours truly, you'd have less time to spy ferher."

His father smiled with a certain touch of guile. It amused him when Pat assumed the lordly air and talked patronisingly to him, but he never resented it. His nerve had not been the same since the will trial, and, though he had occasional gleams of his old wily, indomitable spirit, his son knew a great change in him. And sometimes contemplating the frightful ordeal approaching he was conscious of a genuine dismay. Only the most brazen effrontery and callousness could carry them through, and if his father failed at the critical moment it would be all up with them. They had laid all their plans already, however, and were even prepared to decamp on a moment's notice if necessary to save themselves.

"Well, it isn't long now," said Pat, with a narrow look at his father. "The only one I'm in serious doubt

about is Gardiner. I saw him yesterday half-seas over. Happily for us he isn't garrulous in that state, but the reverse. Only, on a scoundrel like him no reliance can really be placed."

"Did he say anything at all about the trial?"

"Oh, yes; a lot. He doesn't know he won't be there," said Patrick, with a grin.

"You think it wouldn't be safe?"

Patrick regarded his father with a doubtful look.

"Dad, there's times when it's you I'm doubtful about. You've never got over that beastly business in the spring."

Ruthven pulled himself together with a start and a somewhat nervous look round, which did not escape his son's notice.

"Shouldn't be surprised if he had a stroke of some kind. It would be a godsend at the proper moment. After fifty a man's nerves can't be relied on," was his inward thought.

"Keeping quiet, are they?" he said aloud, harking back to a former remark. "Well, you can't make bricks without straw. There's one comfort, it can't be a long drawn-out agony. A fortnight to-morrow and we'll probably know where we are."

That evening, when he went out to pay two visits, Ruthven called at the surgery of Dr. Gardiner in Rankeillour Street. He was on private business of his own, which he had not even confided to his father. A change had mysteriously occurred in their relationship. The son was now leader and adviser—the father largely like clay in the hands of the potter. Patrick's wits had become extraordinarily sharpened of late. Perhaps the knowledge that, if the trial went in Alice Harman's favour, retribution would not be tardy in overtaking him roused every capability and sharpened it to the highest pitch. Patrick was, indeed, now a worthy chip of the old block, a more polished and unscrupulous scoundrel than his father. He found Gardiner in :

half-maudlin state sitting on the table with a bottle before him. Ruthven quickly took it and locked it up, putting the key in his pocket.

"What an idiot you are, Gardiner! You might have the ball at your feet—and look at you. Why, you're beastly drunk at this moment."

"So I am, and I want to get drunker. Man, it's glorious! You leave my whisky alone."

"You've had more than is good for you. Come on out for a walk now, Gardiner. I lay you haven't been over the door to-day."

"No; but I've seen a lot of folk here, and did my work, too," he said, in an injured voice.

"You'll be swinging for it one of these days, Gardiner, if you work when you're drunk," he said, with engaging frankness. "I'm your best friend if you'd only believe it. Here, there's your hat, and come along. It's dark, and we'll have a turn under Samson's Ribs."

Gardiner grinned and made no demur. No one saw them leave the house, and though the street was fairly busy they passed unnoticed up the narrow lane towards the Queen's Park.

"Anybody been calling on you lately, Gardiner, asking you to put your name to anything?"

"Lots of callers, oh, yes, lots and lots," he said, with all the tippler's garrulous ease. "They're all very anxious to know my diagnosis of Miss Dempster's case, he, he!"

"Your diagnosis of Miss Dempster's case! What are you talking of, Gardiner? Why, you never saw the old dame in all your life."

"'Cep'in' that, might you and I had the consultation, and we were both as wise after it as we are now, eh?" he said, with a drunken leer, which enraged Ruthven beyond expression. "What a ghastly mistake it had been to put such a weapon in the hands of this drunken reprobate. He foresaw that the story of the bogus consultation related in cold blood in the witness-box would

not only prejudice their case, but perhaps put the halter about his neck.

One little fortnight and the lie would be cast. He had been quite unable to obtain from Gardiner any coherent account of who had been to see him; the babblings of a continuously drunken man, who could imagine or control?

He might even now have spoken words to the other side out of which they could make rich capital. He regarded the shambling figure by his side with a sudden impotent fury. To shut his mouth for ever! What would he not give to achieve that desired consummation? He had brought him out, firstly, to try and get him sobered by the cool fresh air, and in order that he might try and drive home to him the fact that he was to deny absolutely any knowledge of Miss Dempster's case, to swear that he had never been in the house, or been consulted by anybody. After long and painful consideration and consultations, the Ruthvens had concluded that this was their cue, where Gardiner was concerned. But they reckoned without Gardiner himself. The drunken man is the irresponsible man. He can only be relied on to break out at any moment. Things were getting desperate. One day Ruthven had accidentally observed Warburton, the lawyer, in the vicinity of Rankeillour Street, and had immediately jumped to the conclusion that he had been visiting Gardiner. It was a wrong surmise, but he had never been able to get any assurance out of Gardiner that he could depend on. Small wonder that he felt enraged against him.

"I wish you would go away a trip for the benefit of your health, man," he said presently. "It might be the making of you. Wouldn't you like to get back to decent society and practice again?"

"I've plenty to do here, Batty, my boy," he said airily. "Just think how I'd be missed; how jolly I'd be missed."

It was the catchword of a popular street song, and he talled it out in a fine baritone voice now grown somewhat rusty and shaky through misuse. But it was that fine voice and convivial way that had been poor Gardiner's ruin. "Where are we going?" he asked presently, gasping a little with the effect of singing and climbing at the same time. "It's deuced windy up here."

"It's only the good old Radical Road, Gardiner, and the fine breeze will blow the fumes of whisky out of your brain. Man, what a fool you are to let it master you like that! Whisky's a good servant but a bad master, eh?" "Good friend at any time," said Gardiner as he stumbled up the steep ascent, the loose stones tripping him at almost every step.

It was a very dark, moonless night, the air soft and balmy, and somewhere in the dark, dark, blue of the sky twinkled a solitary star. They were now far above the city, and could look across to its myriad fairy-like lights, an incomparable picture for such as have eyes to see it. Poor Gardiner, once a poet and with the artist's eye, had often taken his fill of that noble panorama, though it had no appeal to him to-night. Below them the sheer slope went straight to the bottom, while the rude buttress of Samson's Ribs was between them and the sky. The path was very narrow, but mindful of his drunken companion Ruthven put him in the inside, and kept a firm hold of his arm. So they came by slow degrees to the top, where the wind played in the wanton way of March. It was hardly a safe spot even for the wary and the sure of foot on a dark night with a fresh wind coming up from the sea, a strange choice for a walk in such circumstances. Up there Ruthven released his companion, and himself took the inside of the cliff.

"Now there's a breeze from the firth that ought to sober you in a twinkling. Then we'll maybe get a chance of a decent talk.

But Gardiner, in the sobering process, relapsed into silence. So they moved up a few steps farther.

What happened then was never known in this world, but will be only told at the bar of the Great Judgment. But where two went up the Radical Road only one went down by the sloping side of the braes to Duddingston, and so home by a circuitous route to the south side of the city.

Next day the evening papers contained the announcement that the body of a shabbily dressed man had been found at the base of Samson's Ribs, but how he had come by his end there was no evidence to show. It was surmised, after identification, however, that as he had been known to be drinking heavily for weeks past he had lost his balance, and simply fallen over the cliffs. The idea of suicide was not entertained.

So died Gardiner, once the flower of his family, the most brilliant man of his year, adding another to the long list of victims claimed by the devil of drink.

Ruthven's name was not mentioned in any way, and he bore that crime with him to the grave. None had seen him enter the surgery, to which there was an open door, and none had observed them set out on their walk together.

Poor Gardiner had indeed, as Ruthven suggested, taken a little journey for the benefit of his health.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE FIRST DAY

THE Court was crowded, the doors closed, and the tender April sun streaming through the windows fell upon a sea of anxious faces.

They were waiting for the prisoner to be brought in. Outside in the Parliament Square a dense, immovable mass stretched right out into the Lawnmarket; and the police with difficulty kept a passage open for interested personages, also for the carriages of the high officials of the law to take part in the case. Those in the Square were disappointed of their prey. So far as a sight of the interesting young prisoner was concerned, they were destined to wait in vain. She had been driven to the Court in a closed carriage early enough in the morning to obtain almost entire privacy, this being arranged by the friends in the background who had so strenuously endeavoured to alleviate the horror of her position. They had not been able to do much; Marshall King had indeed been disappointed to find that his influential position in the city so little availed. When he regretted this one day speaking in the prison cell to Alice, she had smiled upon him with infinite pathos.

"But you would not have it otherwise, friend, nor would I. One law for the rich and poor; it is the right thing. And I ask no favours from any one under Heaven; only the justice which will free me from these horrible walls."

When she suddenly appeared—a slim, slight figure in black—in the dock, shadowed by two warders, an almost painful hush was upon the whole Court. The thrill, indeed, could be felt, and to relieve the agonising tension of the moment, especially for her, the Clerk of Court immediately opened the proceedings by impanelling the jury. While this comparatively uninteresting item was being carried through those who were near enough had opportunity to feast their eyes upon the prisoner. Her youth and refined, almost ethereal, beauty appealed to them mightily, and from the first moment popular sympathy was undoubtedly in her favour. The long period of incarceration had robbed her face of its delicate colour; it was now absolutely pale, with that particularly ghastly paleness characteristic of those who are shut up from the fresh air.

She was also much thinner, and her fine eyes when she raised them, as she did once or twice to acknowledge the sympathetic looks of her friends—who sat near, seemed to shine with an unearthly brightness. There was a goodly array of friends, foremost among them the Marshall Kings, the O'Briens, Jack Traquair, Miss Cummings and Dr. Guthrie.

When asked to stand up to be formally charged with the capital offence, Alice Harman did so quietly; and with a striking and pathetic dignity which had never been excelled in that sordid place. There was no trace of fear or nervousness, as her clear eyes met unflinchingly the gaze of the Judge.

"Not guilty, my Lord."

Then began the evidence for the Crown, which was most attentively followed. It was stated how, on substantial evidence lodged by competent persons, the Fiscal had ordered the exhumation of Miss Dempster's body for the purpose of expert medical examination.

The medical evidence was then taken at great length, and a visible buzz of excitement ran through the vast assemblage when the witness stated in measured, confi-

dent tones that enough arsenic had been discovered in the various organs to cause death.

He further expressed his opinion that the poison had not been administered at one time, but extended over a period of weeks, and must therefore have been in the hands of a person having continuous access to the patient. His choice of a word was unfortunate inasmuch as it directed the attention of the listeners to the medical adviser of the deceased lady. Neither Ruthven nor his father, however, was in Court.

By the time the medical evidence was given the lunch hour had come, and the principal personages left the Court. But the great bulk of the public remained, fearful of losing the places they had scrambled to obtain. Those who had been far-sighted enough to provide themselves with refreshment partook of it, and discussed the probable issues of the case.

The hour quickly fled, and at two o'clock the case was resumed. The medical evidence having been completed, Rebecca Dalglish or Meikle was called to the witness-box. Every neck was craned to obtain a good look at her, it being generally known that she had been the personal attendant of the late Miss Dempster, and the principal witness for the prosecution. She made a figure imposing enough. Clad in her wedding gown of stiff black silk, a velvet jacket, and a handsome bonnet, tied under her chin with a wide ribbon of bright mauve colour, she looked the picture of substantial and unimpeachable respectability. Alice Harman from the dock regarded her with a curious interest, seeing her now for the first time in her new estate of wife to the worthy Meikle. She knew the implacability of the woman's temper, her hatred and jealousy of her, and faintly wondered to what lengths it would carry her. She speedily learned.

When being sworn, Dalglish removed her brand-new bright brown kid glove, and took the oath without a falter.

"Rebecca Dalglish or, Meikle, you were in the service of the late Miss Katherine Dempster for a long period?"

"For six-and-twenty year, my Lord. I entered her service in eighteen——"

"At what age?" he asked, at which a titter ran through the Court.

"I was a young woman, my Lord, just over twenty."

"I see. Well, we won't press the point. In what capacity did you first enter Miss Dempster's service?"

"As housemaid first; then own woman to Miss Dempster."

"Your duties in the latter capacity bringing and keeping you a constant companion with your mistress?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"You were not in the house, I suppose, at the time of the late Mrs. Harman's marriage to Captain Harman?" he asked, and at this unexpected and seemingly irrelevant question the prisoner visibly started and sat forward eagerly.

"No, my Lord, but I kent all about it. All Edinburgh did. It was a great scandal at the time."

"Did Miss Dempster ever mention the subject of her sister to you?"

Dalglish hesitated a moment, as if trying to recollect.

"She was a very reserved woman; she spoke little at a' times, but she never forgave her sister, an' when she spoke about her was very bitter. There was a portrait of Miss Lily Dempster, Mrs. Captain Harman, in the drawin'-room. I took that down with my ain hands."

"Under instructions from Miss Dempster, or on your own initiative?"

"My mistress bade me, of cotirse. If I had done it myself she would have put me outside the door quick enough," replied Dalglish, in a voice of withering scorn.

"Then Miss Dempster was a hard mistress?"

"She was a ledy that knew her place, but she was a

good, kind mistress to me—at least until somebody came between us."

"You were an inmate of the household at 84 George Square when Miss Harman came to England to live with her aunt?"

"Yes, sir, of course."

"What were Miss Dempster's views about the coming of her niece? Was she pleased or otherwise?"

"She was very ill-pleased," replied Mrs. Meikle, without a moment's hesitation. "She spoke quite freely to me about it. She felt it hard that, never having looked near her, as it were, for so many years, Captain Harman should expect her to provide for his daughter."

"Did she express that opinion in your hearing?"

"Yes, dizzens o' times, and even after the letter was wrote tellin' her to come, she was very unhappy about it."

"What state of health was Miss Dempster in at that time?"

"Very middling; she hadna been weel for at least twa year before Miss Harman came; not that she was very ill, as it were, but no' strong, and she didna go oot much."

"Had she many friends come to see her?"

"Mrs. Dalgleish shook her head."

"Very few, only Maister Ruthven, her cousin, and his son, the doctor, that attended her."

"Ah, she was very friendly with them, and Dr. Ruthven attended her, you say, for how long before her death?"

"Twa-three year. She was very fond of him."

"And had implicit confidence in him, I suppose?"

Mrs. Meikle pursed up her lips a moment, and seemed in some doubt as to what answer to give. Counsel at once repeated the question.

"She didna tak' his medicines," she admitted.

"Was she in the habit of doctoring herself in any way?"

"She got herb tea and stuff frae the herbalist in the Causewayside, but she neyer took a great dea' o' medicine, and she had good health for a woman of her years."

"You were in the house, then, when Miss Harman came from England. Did she and Miss Dempster get on well together?"

Mrs. Meikle shook her head.

"No ava; that is, at first. After she seemed to get my mistress like under her thumb, and she was feart at her."

Mrs. Meikle slightly turned her head as she made this statement so that she did not need to encounter Alice Harman's earnest gaze, which, she felt, never swerved from her face.

"Ah, do you mean that she took management in the house, or seemed to interfere with the domestic arrangements?"

"She interfered frae the very first, upsetting everything. She would not even sleep in the room Miss Dempster had ordered for her, an' she took ower the housekeepin' after the first week, ordering everything and paying the books. We couldna even get what we wantit or had been accustomed to in the kitchen."

"And you, as an old and trusted servant, naturally resented this?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did Miss Dempster seem unhappy or worried by the change?"

"No, she was mair helpless-like, as if she couldna help it. It seemed to me an' my neebors as if her speerit was broken."

"She ceased to take much interest, then, in her affairs after Miss Harman came. Did she ever speak to you aboot it, seeming to regret that she had ever permitted her to come?"

"She never spoke much at any time, as I said. She often said to me: 'Dalgleish, we're livin' in cheenged

days'; and when I compleened, she said she was sorry she couldna better it, as she was leavin' everything to Miss Harman."

"But you don't suggest that Miss Harman was unkind or cruel to Miss Dempster?"

"I thocht my ain thochts. She seemed to forget that she was the mistress o' the hoose, and she spoke to us as if we'd been dirt. We didna like it, of course."

"Did you ever speak to any one about this, or mention your suspicions that Miss Harman was unkind to her aunt?"

"Only to Meikle, an' my ither neebors," she answered; "I may have mentioned it to the doctor."

"Ah, the doctor! What kind of relations were there between Miss Harman and the doctor?"

CHAPTER XXXIX

IMPLACABLE

MRS. MEIKLE again hesitated a moment. "Oh, they hated wan anither like poison frae the very first. The doctor kent a' Miss Dempster's ways, an' he was angry, as we a' were, at the changes. But he didna say much until he was obliged to speak."

"This was the state of affairs then at the time of Miss Dempster's seizure?"

"Yes, sir."

"What state of health was Miss Dempster in that day? Can you remember what happened in detail?"

"Yes, perfectly. She was about her usual. She hadna been very weel from the time that Miss Harman came, and that day she was nae waur than usual. But the doctor had told her she wasna to go oot. When the carriage was ordered by Miss Harman, we a' spoke aboot it in the kitchen."

"At what hour did they leave the house?"

"After luncheon, aboot half-past two, and they were away till half-past four. I took in the tea whenever they came back. The doctor had ca'd and was waitin'. He was there when Miss Dempster suddenly fainted away."

"Ah, then you carried her upstairs to bed, I suppose?"

"Yes, and the doctor examined her; he said she had been over tired, and said to Miss Harman that she shouldna ha' taken her oot. That was the beginning o' her illness; she was never hersel' efter it."

"How long was she ill altogether?"

"I didna coont, bit it's easy; she was seized on the twenty-eighth day of January an' she deid on the seventeenth o' February, so it wasna long."

"Dr. Ruthven attending her all the time?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Miss Harman sole nurse?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who was in charge of the nursing arrangements?"

"Oh, her—Miss Harman, I mean. She wadna let me sit up at night, an' she poisoned my mistress against me, so that she wadna let me in the room," said Mrs. Meikle, in a voice of strong indignation.

"Do you mean to say that Miss Harman nursed her night and day for the whole of that time?"

"I do, and she wadna let wan o's that had been in the house, some o's afore she was born, even gie her her medicine. The doctor didna like it. He said he was never sure that she got it. He didna think she did get it."

"And you agreed with him?"

"I've seen her pour it doon the sink," she answered quietly, wherat there was a sensation in the Court.

"Be very careful. Do you mean to say that you have, with your own eyes, seen Miss Harman pour out the medicine ordered by the doctor, and which he believed had been given to the patient?"

"I have, and I believed, and he believed, that the only medicine she did get was what he gied her himsel'. Near the end he gied her mair, and Miss Harman got fewer orders. He was very uneasy aboot it, I could see it in his face. Meikle and I consulted together, and we agreed that it was my duty to tell him what I had seen and what I believed."

"And you did so, when?"

"Only the day before my mistress deid. She had been very ill a' day, wanderin' an' seein' them that were awa' in the room, and I was feared she was near death."

"I was in desperation when I spoke to the doctor, Meikle and me thegither."

"You communicated your suspicions to him? What did you precisely say?"

"I jist said we werena satisfied, that my mistress wasna lookit efter, an' that Miss Harman sleepit in the night time, when she ought to have been watchin', and I begged him to let me in at nicht, even if not at any other time."

"What did he say?"

"He wasna satisfied himsel', and when I telt him she didna get the medicine, but that it was emptied oot, he was very angry, and said he would speak to Miss Harman."

"With what result?"

"I got leave to sit up wi' my mistress that nicht."

"Did Miss Harman seem agreeable?"

"She didna say much. She hated me and I——"

"You hated her, I suppose?"

Mrs. Meikle faintly smiled.

"We werena very freendly, ony way."

"So you sat up, Miss Harman retiring to rest at the usual time?"

"About ten, efter the Professor cam', and gied her his report."

"Ah, a consultant! Suggested by whom?"

Mrs. Meikle shook her head.

"I dinna ken; the doctor brocht him, and Miss Harman saw him. I heard very little about it."

"Miss Harman went to bed then, at the usual time, and what happened after that?"

"The doctor came back at twelve o'clock."

"What state was Miss Dempster in ther?"

"Unconscious, but she seemed to be suffering pain sometimes. She didna lie still a meenit hardly. The doctor was concerned about thae pains. He had spoken about them to me afore."

"He could not account for them?"

"No; he said she shouldna hae them, and I fancied he had suspicions like the rest o' us that she was gettin' something she shouldna hae been gettin'. Indeed, I've seen her gie her things ooten a little wooden box she kept locked in the press."

"Tell us exactly what you did see."

"I saw wan nicht, when I came up to peep at my mistress, I was in the dressing-room, and they were speaking together. I heard Miss Dempster say, 'I'll take no more of their drugs, Alice. Gie me some more out of that little brown bottle of yours. It soothed me better than anything I've ever tasted.'"

"It's very harmless stuff, auntie; poor father used to take it constantly. It was prescribed by an old ayah we had in the halls, who had a wonderful skill in herbs and native medicines.' Then I saw her go to the press, unlock it wi' a key she keepit in her pocket, and take out the box. Syne she took oot the bottle, and poured brown drops into a glass, filled it up with water, and gied it to my mistress. Almost the next meent she was asleep."

"But this did not happen on the night you have been speaking of?"

"No, I only got into the room when Miss Harman left it, and she was sleepin' then. I gied her naething till the doctor came, when he gied her his ain medicine himself."

"Did he think her much worse that night?"

"He said it couldn't be long, and he examined the things in the press."

"Having previously obtained the key from Miss Harman, who gave her consent?"

"Oh, no. The doctor was very much concerned when he heard what I told him about her givin' Miss Dempster stuff oot o' the press, and he said it was his duty, his and mine, to open it, which we did."

"Ah, and what did he say about the contents of the medicine-chest?"

"Very little. He didna say he suspected her then, or that he was scared she had any ill intention. But I could see that he thoct a lot. And as he said himsel', it didna gie him a chance for it was Miss Harman treating the case, and him getting the dirdum like."

"I see! Well, and he administered the correct medicine afterwards, and what happened then?"

"She was very restless up to three, then she fell asleep. She was still asleep when Miss Harman came doon in the mornin'."

"But she died the next day, did she not?"

"Yes, very quietly; jist shippit away, and suffered very little. If only she could hae spoken and told the truth, it would hae saved a lot o' bother."

"Did Miss Harman seem upset by the death?"

"She grat. She pretended of late to be very fond o' her aunt, but we in the hoose kent it was only pretence."

There was a short pause, then the cross-examination began, and for the next hour poor Mrs. Meikle was kept on tenterhooks, questioned and cross-questioned, every little it in brought back to her remembrance, and they endeavoured to catch her up on every point.

She contradicted herself once or twice on minor points, but in the main held to her story and to the facts which had led up to the lodging of information with the police.

Mrs. Meikle was informed that she could stand down, and did so, wiping her face vigorously with a highly scented pocket-handkerchief.

Meikle was the next witness, and he was obviously nervous as he stepped into the box.

He had not, of course, been allowed to hear the evidence of his wife, nor had any opportunity of hearing how she had acquitted herself.

He was not examined at great length, counsel quickly discovering that he had very little of interest to communicate, never having been inside the sickroom during the whole period of his mistress's illness. He could,

corroborate, however, the general evidence of his wife regarding the state of affairs in the house, and his account of their anxiety and their final appeal to the doctor tallied with hers, and on the whole created a favourable impression. At the end of his examination the case looked more serious for Alice Harman than her friends had expected. She appeared outwardly calm; indeed, she felt astonished at herself. Her attitude and feeling were that of an interested spectator, and she had listened to the evidence of Mrs. Meikle with consuming wonder and even admiration for the ingenuity with which she had pieced her story together.

It revealed to her how she had been watched and spied upon, and she asked herself whether it was her real self who was the object of all this bitter espionage and hatred.

Meikle was released after about half an hour's questioning, the next witness called being PATRICK RUTHVEN, senior, cousin and legal adviser to Miss Dempster.

CHAPTER XL

THE RUTHVENS AT BAY

EVERY eye was upon him as he entered the box with a somewhat brisk step and an assumed jaunty air. Alice, regarding him keenly, was astonished at the change in him. She had not seen him, for eight or nine months, during which he had aged considerably. But he held himself erect in the box, and took the oath without ~~hesitation~~ or reluctance.

He was well known to most of the members of the legal profession present, and the public still remembered his name in connection with the great law case. It was the general impression in legal circles that the Ruthvens were at the bottom of the murder charge, though they had effaced themselves successfully, and had seemed to be extremely reluctant to come forward even when subpoenaed as witnesses.

The counsel for the Crown prepared himself for an interesting and possibly lively half-hour.

"You are the cousin of the late Miss Katherine Dempster, I understand?"

"Yes, her full cousin; her mother and mine were sisters."

"You were on terms of intimacy with her through the greater portion of her life?"

"Through the whole of her life," he corrected gravely.

"She consulted me on every possible point connected with her affairs."

"You were her legal adviser then?"

"Yes."

"You were aware of the correspondence which took place between Miss Dempster and Miss Alice Harman previous to the latter's arrival in Edinburgh?"

"She made me aware of it too late to advise her, unfortunately, or I should have advised her against it."

"Why, may I inquire?"

"Because I knew that she would not be happy with one so opposed to her in every way. I knew the history of the family, and the circumstances in which Miss Alice Harman had been reared. When Miss Dempster did tell me that the invitation had been sent and accepted, I merely remarked that it was a pity. I did not approve of it in Miss Dempster's interests, and subsequent events proved that I was right."

"Ah! yet to the ordinary observer it might have seemed that the advent of a young bright girl into the household would have been a singularly happy event for a lonely old woman like Miss Dempster."

"To the ordinary observer it might have seemed so, but there were circumstances which rendered the case different from any other. Captain Harman never treated the family of his wife well."

"We need not go into that perhaps. Miss Dempster herself seemed satisfied beforehand, at least, that she had done, if not well, at least her duty?"

Ruthven merely shrugged his shoulders.

"There was no question of duty, and Miss Dempster did not make me her confidant regarding her motives. She simply made up her own mind, and acted on it, that was all."

"You saw Miss Harman soon after her arrival and continued on the same terms of intimacy with your cousin as before?"

"It made no difference to our relationship. We had always been very good friends, but I was not in the habit of going very much to the house. My visits continued about the same after Miss Harman's arrival as before."

"Ah! how often in the course of a week, say, did you visit the house?"

"Once or perhaps twice. It made no difference to that, as I say."

"And did you observe a change in the domestic arrangements or in the demeanour of your cousin after her niece's arrival?"

"A considerable change. I quickly saw that Miss Harman was acquiring a great influence over her, and that very shortly after her arrival she became practically the mistress of the house."

"Miss Dempster not objecting, however, or seeming unhappy or rebellious under it? Do you make any suggestion of that kind?"

"I make no suggestion. I relate what I observed, what would have been palpable to ordinary observation."

"You considered Miss Dempster to be under undue influence then?"

"I would hardly call it undue; it was the influence of a strong, young, determined will over one weakened by age and illness. Miss Dempster had never been a strong woman, and during the last year of her life I noticed a great change in her mental powers, just as my son observed the change and decline of her physical ones."

"Ah, so you observed all this, and regretted the attitude and standing of Miss Harman in the house?"

"I felt it because I had been her friend so long, and after Miss Harman's advent there was not the intimacy, or, to put it properly, the confidence."

"What about Miss Dempster's legal affairs?"

"They remained, as they had always been, in my hands."

"You expected, did you not, to be benefited by Miss Dempster's death?"

"I did," he answered frankly. "She had never made a will, but she assured me several times, especially during the last year of her life, that I and my son would be all right."

"And naturally after Miss Harman's arrival you began to have your doubts?"

"Naturally, but the matter was never alluded to between us. I believed in my cousin's integrity, and as I had never received a penny for professional services during a period extending over thirty years I naturally expected some recognition after her death."

"The will disappointed you then?"

"Yes, and I was not alone in that disappointment."

"You suggest that Miss Harman used her influence to get her aunt to draw up the will in her favour, with which we have all some recollection in this Court?"

"I prefer not to answer the question. I submit that it is irrelevant to the case."

"Not at all. Do you suggest that Miss Harman used her influence with her aunt to get the will in her own favour drawn up?"

No answer; and the question being repeated with some peremptoriness, Ruthven replied with a jerky monosyllable in the affirmative.

"We come then to the events immediately preceding the death of Miss Dempster. Did you see her while she was ill?"

"Only once."

"You observed, I suppose, that Miss Harman was in close and unbroken attendance on her aunt?"

"I observed nothing, as I was not on the spot. I heard it from my son and others."

"Who were all dissatisfied?"

"All dissatisfied and suspicious."

"You knew enough of the relations between Miss Dempster and Miss Harman to share these suspicions?"

"If I had suspicions I never mentioned them. The whole matter was outside my province. But, seeing my son every day, I knew and sympathised with his anxiety, and the old servants, who naturally resented the intrusion of Miss Harman, who had destroyed their

mistress's confidence in them, spoke freely to me on more than one occasion."

"You knew that your son was anxious. Whose suggestion was it that he should have a consultant?"

"Well, it was mine. I thought it right in his own interests that the responsibility should be shared."

"And you recommended Professor Gardiner?"

"I recommended nobody. Again that was not my province. My son knows his business; I never interfered with him."

"Coming to the day of Miss Dempster's death, did your son ever mention to you that he entertained suspicions of Miss Harman's good faith?"

"There were symptoms in Miss Dempster's case which puzzled him, and he frequently said so to me, but as I did not understand the medical aspect of the case I could only sympathise and advise on the most general grounds."

"You cannot specify these suspicions?"

"No, I knew that he suspected Miss Harman was administering some counter drug or irritant or something. My Lord, I must plead ignorance of technical terms," he added, looking appealingly towards the Judge.

"He did not expect Miss Dempster's death when it occurred?"

"Oh, yes, she was exhausted; it was no surprise to him."

"But he continued dissatisfied even after the death took place?"

"Yes, he said there ought to have been a post-mortem. He even suggested it to Miss Harman, I believe, but she affected horror, and declined."

"Why, may I ask, having such strong suspicions, did you or your son not make communication to the police?"

"The circumstances attending the death and the deposition of Miss Dempster's property put us in a false

and most painful position, and we concluded it would be better to let the past bury its dead. That is the simple explanation."

"You were disappointed largely by the deposition of Miss Dempster's property and wealth?"

"Yes," he replied, simply and without comment, and somehow his frank, unhesitating, honest answer made a most favourable impression.

His cross-examination elicited nothing of fresh interest, and he parried the questioning well, with the ease of a practised hand.

He preserved throughout the moderate tone which had characterised the opening remarks; he appeared like a man willing, but not particularly eager, to tell the whole unvarnished truth.

The professional men present, who did not believe in him but thought him a consummate scoundrel, did not withhold from him their meed of admiration for his adroit and creditable appearance in the witness-box.

His son was the next witness. The great audience almost rose to a man as he entered, a slim, well-carried figure in the professional frock-coat, wearing a neat black tie, and his general appearance correct and even dignified. He carried one hand slightly clenched by his side, and his face was very pale; his jaw set, however, with a determination which surprised Alice Harman, as she regarded him intently. Hitherto she had imagined him weak, if unscrupulous.

Patrick Claud Ruthven being duly sworn, counsel addressed him at once.

There was a visible quickening of interest, all feeling that this was the evidence that might practically decide the case and the fate of the woman in the dock. Though realising that herself she made no sign, but continued to gaze steadily at the witness-box with a detached, interested air, as one regards a spectacle which cannot effect a personal issue. He studiously avoided looking in her direction, however, and riveted his attention on the man

who was about to put him through the severest ordeal of his life.

"You are the son of Mr. Patrick Ruthven, cousin to the late Miss Dempster?"

"Yes, I am her second cousin."

"And intimate with her from your childhood, I presume?"

"Yes, I have been about the old house in George Square all my life; in fact, it was always a second home to me."

"You were doubtless much attached to her then?"

"Yes, she was exceedingly kind to me, and I was grateful," he replied readily.

"Her kindness was with you through your college days, and right on into your professional career?"

"Yes, she paid all my college fees, set me up in my present house and practice, and she redeemed her promise to become my first patient. There was never any cloud or jar upon our relations," he replied, with a studied frankness and simplicity which duly impressed the Court.

"Who attended her before you were professionally qualified to undertake her case?"

"A man named Lang but he died several years before I became Miss Dempster's medical attendant."

"And what did she do in the interval?"

"Doctored herself when she needed it, but she had always enjoyed good health, though she was not what might be called a robust woman."

"How long were you Miss Dempster's medical attendant?"

"For four years, but the whole of my professional attendance upon her personally was practically put into the last twelve months of her life, when her constitution began to break up."

"She had bad health, then, during the last year of her life?"

"Not bad health; she began to fail, but I saw no

reason why she could not have lived a few more years. She had a good constitution, and belonged to a long-lived race."

"Ah! you were in attendance on Miss Dempster, then, when Miss Harman came to live with her?"

"Off and on: not in constant attendance upon her. She was fairly well at that time, though she had on my advice almost entirely given up going out. It was a very bitter winter, and her lungs were constantly threatened. She was always better when she did not go out."

"When Miss Harman came she altered all this?"

He hesitated a moment, and then answered "Yes".

CHAPTER XLI

THE MEDICAL EVIDENCE

NEXT morning at ten o'clock the examination of Dr. Ruthven was resumed. If possible the Court was more crowded than on the previous day, and hundreds thronged the open space of Parliament Square unable to obtain admittance. Counsel resumed at the point where examination had been postponed.

"You observed a change in Miss Dempster, both in her health and spirits, from the time Miss Harman arrived in Edinburgh?"

"A great change, which came about gradually, but was none the less striking."

"How would you describe that change—as a general weakening of her powers?"

"A general weakening; she became completely subservient to the will of her niece; gave over her household management into her hands, in itself indisputable proof to all who knew Miss Dempster with any degree of intimacy."

"You mean that she looked after her household well?"

"She was extremely careful to the verge of parsimoniousness. I had the greatest difficulty in persuading her to obtain strong nourishment for herself."

"And this parsimoniousness disappeared after Miss Harman came?"

"She seemed to become indifferent; Miss Harman did as she pleased."

"Altering the whole arrangements of the house?"

"Many of them; she altered the meal hours for one thing, and constantly urged Miss Dempster to go out, although she was aware of my objections. I frequently expressed an opinion contrary to her."

"Then you were not intimate with Miss Harman?"

A slight expression of surprise uplifted Ruthven's eyebrows.

"We were barely civil. Miss Harman for some reason, best known to herself, distrusted and tried to discredit me. I did not think she treated Miss Dempster as an old lady in her position ought to have been treated. We disagreed on every possible point."

"And you were assured of a distinct decline in Miss Dempster's health and spirits—a decline traceable, as you believed, to the influence of her niece?"

"That was my opinion. I do not oblige any one else to agree with me, but I had exceptional opportunities for judging."

"You were in the house on the day Miss Dempster was seized with her sudden and afterwards fatal illness?"

"I was. I had an appointment with her at half-past three. Either she had forgotten it or had been persuaded to disregard it. Anyhow, I arrived at the house to find her out driving in the carriage in opposition to my express wishes, for she had a cold upon her, and the weather was of the most objectionable kind."

"You spoke your mind to Miss Harman on the subject?"

"I had no opportunity. Miss Dempster was taken ill almost immediately upon entering the house. I could see she had been subjected to some extraordinary strain of some kind. Afterwards when I learned what had taken place, I understood."

"What was the nature of Miss Dempster's seizure?"

"It was of an apoplectic nature, but not in itself sufficiently serious to have caused death."

"Even in a person of Miss Dempster's age?"

"Even in a person of Miss Dempster's age. She recovered so far, yielding to the usual treatment, and ought, humanly speaking, to have made a complete recovery—that is, a comparatively complete recovery. That she did not, but continued to go back, filled me with anxiety and concern. In fact, I was worried nearly to death over it."

"Was that the reason you suggested a second opinion?"

"Partly, and partly because I was perfectly aware that Miss Harman was plainly dissatisfied."

"Who was the opinion?"

"Dr. David Gardiner, of Rankeillour Street, since deceased."

"Did those in the house understand that it was Professor Gardiner, of the University, who came?"

"If they did, I cannot help that. They jumped to conclusions. I made no statement regarding him. The confusion might easily arise, for their names were exactly the same, and they even bore a slight resemblance to one another in appearance."

"You were of opinion that the deceased gentleman was a fit and proper person to call in for a case of such importance and seriousness?"

"I had the very highest opinion of his professional ability. He was near; the matter was urgent. At the time Professor Gardiner was in Egypt."

"Dr. Gardiner, of course, corroborated your opinion?"

"He had a conversation with Miss Harman. I prefer not to answer that question, which seems to cast a slur on my professional reputation."

"Did you communicate your suspicions to Dr. Gardiner?"

"No."

"Or to any one?"

"Only to Mrs. Dalglish, Miss Dempster's confidential servant, or, to put it correctly, she spoke of her suspicions to me."

"And you both suspected that Miss Harman was administering drugs other than what were ordered by you?"

"We did. I could not otherwise account for certain symptoms visible in my patient."

"What were those symptoms?"

"The doctor looked up sharply.

"Am I obliged to answer?"

"Yes."

"She suffered a great deal of pain for one thing, paroxysms of pain for which her disease would not account. I was at a loss to understand that."

"Did you observe her in any of these paroxysms?"

"Unfortunately, no; I was only told of them."

"By whom?"

"By Miss Harman herself; and by Mrs. Dalglish."

"At that time did you suspect poisoning?"

"I cannot say; I felt uneasy, just as Mrs. Dalglish did, and I took what precautions I reasonably could without letting Miss Harman think I suspected her."

"It was evidently a case of life and death. Don't you think your consideration was, well, to say the least of it, carried to excess?"

"It was a difficult position, and I had no proof."

"What was your reason for insisting on Mrs. Dalglish taking the night duty?"

"Because we both felt Miss Harman could not possibly do all that was required. The strain was too great, and, besides, after what Mrs. Dalglish told me, I decided that some one else must be on the spot."

"What did Mrs. Dalglish tell you?"

"That Miss Dempster did not have her medicine regularly; that Miss Harman poured it out, and on one occasion, at least, substituted something else."

"Did you communicate your suspicions to Miss Harman?"

"No."

"You made a counterplot, as it were, to watch Miss Harman?"

"In the interests of my patient, yes."

"What transpired on the night before Miss Dempster died?"

"Nothing particular; she had her medicine at the appointed time, and was not neglected."

"Did you find anything in the room, in the arrangement, or in the articles there, of which you did not approve?"

Ruthven narrowed his brows, and deliberated a moment.

"I found a medicine-chest in the cupboard."

"Did you examine the contents?"

"Only casually, and could not have told at a glance, without testing the contents of the phials, what any of them contained."

"You returned the box to the cupboard, and said nothing to Miss Harman of what you had seen?"

"I did."

"Is this the box you saw and handled that night?"

Ruthven looked at the box on the table.

"It is the same, I believe. I remember the brass work of the lock."

"Did you communicate your suspicions to any one else after Miss Dempster's death?"

"Only to my father, and we agreed that, considering all things, it would be better to say nothing."

"Were you present when Miss Dempster died?"

"I was."

"Did she die a natural death?"

"Yes; so far as a death in such circumstances could be called natural."

"Were there any symptoms present which would have led you to believe she died from poison?"

"I prefer not to say."

"Answer, if you please."

"Well, there were symptoms, but only slight. I said nothing about them."

"Did you think when you saw Miss Dempster the

night before her death that she would probably die before the morning?"

"I had no fixed opinion. I knew she could not last long."

"You gave a certificate certifying death by natural causes."

"Yes; it was the only thing in the circumstances to do."

And so the dreary, yet intensely interesting, questioning went on. The cross-examination of the doctor was a piece of consummate skill, but he met it with astonishing simplicity and dexterity, and left the Court fairly well satisfied with himself.

His evidence closed the case for the Crown.

The luncheon hour intervened again, and public interest seemed strung to a higher pitch than ever. During the interval the case was freely discussed, and it was generally felt that it looked black against the prisoner. It was asserted that some very strong evidence would require to be forthcoming to refute what had been adduced for the Crown.

Alice remained in the same calm, apparently indifferent, state. She had the advantage of her evidence coming after the prosecution. Her friends depended very much upon that. She had not seen or spoken with any of them since the trial began, except as she entered and left the Court. Traquair sat as close behind her as he dared, and his varying expressions were a fair barometer of the atmospheric condition of the Court.

When they reassembled for the afternoon all wondered who would be the first witness called for the defence.

They did not know that practically there would be only one. Her name was presently called in stentorian tones.

Christina Caldwell.

CHAPTER XLII

FOR HER SAKE

NO special interest attached to the name, and the figure of the young servant-maid in her neat black garb was not suggestive of much possibility. Alice Harman sat forward as the girl appeared in the narrow way leading towards the witness-box, and eagerly, almost tenderly, scanned her face. She was the only friend the great gloomy house had held for her, and she had been already informed by Warburton how much was likely to depend on the girl's evidence.

Caldwell's face, though devoid of any trace of colour, was absolutely impassive. Among the many priceless lessons she had learned from those who had lifted her from the pit, Teen had learned to pray.

She had prayed with a deep, almost an awful, earnestness that God, whom she had so recently been taught to believe in, as the God of all righteousness and truth, would stand by her side in this the day of her fiery trial, and guide her tongue. To speak the whole truth was her only desire and aim. It had been impressed on her that it was the truth that would save her she loved. She cast one yearning, almost wild, glance at the face of Alice as she entered, and that glance seemed like a fresh vow.

All unconscious of these deep and significant undercurrents, the trivial public felt its interest momentarily wane, and the silence was less tense than usual as the first questions were put and answered.

"Christina Caldwell, how long were you in the service of the late Miss Dempster at George Square?"

"I came on the twenty-ninth of December last, afore her death."

"What were your duties?"

"I was housemaid under Grace Jervis."

"Miss Harman had arrived in the house then?"

"Yes, sir; she was there afore I came."

"Were you responsible to Miss Dempster or to Miss Harman for the discharge of your duties? I mean, which was your mistress?" he added, observing that his long sentence and formal expression seemed somewhat to confuse the girl. He determined, seeing that, to use the simplest language throughout.

"Miss Dempster was my mistress. She engaged me when Dr. Guthrie brought me to the house."

"Ah, you were introduced to Miss Dempster's notice by Dr. Guthrie?"

"Yes, sir."

"And took all your orders from Miss Dempster?"

"No; frae Grace sometimes, and sometimes frae Mrs. Dalgleish. But Miss Harman was my real mistress. I had to run efter them a'."

Alice faintly smiled at this straight deliverance, which fell quite solemnly from Christina's lips.

"Ah, you did not like that. You saw very little of Miss Dempster, then?"

"Very little until a week or two afore her death. She meddled wi' nothing. She seemed to be no able. She left everything to Miss Harman."

"Then Miss Harman was really the mistress? And things were different under her?"

"Yes, sir. Miss Harman was the housekeeper, and gied the orders. The others didna like it, sir."

"But you liked it?"

"Oh, yes; Miss Harman was kind, and when I didna ken the things, she never laughed like Jervis and Mrs. Dalgleish. She showed me how to do them richt. She learned me everything I ken."

"And you are grateful to her, and thought her a good mistress?"

"Yes, sir," replied Teen, and there sounded the first falter in her brave voice.

"There was dissatisfaction and rebellion in the kitchen over the change?"

"Yes, sir; they a' hated Miss Harman."

"Could you give any reason for this hatred seeing she was, according to your account, a good, considerate mistress?"

Teen hesitated a moment.

"She stopped some things that went on in the kitchen, and there was less wastry. She was kind to them a', but she looked efter the hoose."

This simple, human observation pleased the Court, and the spectators exchanged amused and interested glances.

"Now, about Miss Dempster. Did she seem unhappy, too, and dissatisfied, like the kitchen?"

"No, sir; she never spoke much to me, and when she did it was to bid me be a good girl to Miss Harman and mind what she said."

"Did she seem fond of her niece?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you saw no sign of coercion?"

"Sir?"

"I mean it did not strike you that Miss Dempster was badly treated by Miss Harman?"

"No, sir; they were very happy thegither, and often laughin'. One day Miss Dempster said to me: 'Lassie, if Miss Harman had been here ten year ago this would ha' been a better and a happier hoose'."

"You were quite assured in your own mind, then, that the things they said in the kitchen were untrue?"

"I paid no attention to them. They could be there? Oh! ye never heard onything like it! The Coogate's naething to it."

"Miss Dempster was not in good health, then, when you came and after it?"

"No; but she seemed brighter and cheerier when wi' Miss Harman, and when they went oot in the carriage she looked like a different woman. Maikle and Mrs. Dalgleish were aye in the worst rage when they went bot thegither. They said Miss Harman was trying to kill Miss Dempster."

"Were you in the house when Miss Dempster took ill?"

"No, sir; I was at the Pleasance seein' my mother, and when I came in I heard aboot it. She was in her bed."

"Did you see her?"

"Yes; when I filled up the coal-scuttle for the night. Miss Harman was in a terrible state, and wouldna leave the room."

"She nursed her devotedly all through then?"

"Yes, sir; she never left the room, except the wan' night when the doctor said Mrs. Dalgleish must sit up."

"You were out and in of the room a great deal, then, in the performance of your duties, and had exceptional opportunities of judging part, at least, of what took place there?"

"Yes, sir."

"And did you see anything that might be called neglect or carelessness on the part of Miss Harman?"

"No, sir; she never left her, and hardly closed an e'e for three weeks. I dinna ken hoo she did it. She said wan day that she had learned to sleep wi' an e'e open."

"And she was uniformly kind and attentive to her aunt?"

"Yes, sir. Miss Dempster couldna bear her bot the room. When she had to leave to see onybody that called, she wad make me wait. She couldna bear Dalgleish in the room."

"Was not that strange, seeing Mrs. Dalgleish had been her faithful servant for so many years?"

Christina shook her head and made no sound.

"Did you not think it strange?"

"If you were ill, sir, ye wadna seek Dalgleish in your room," she answered, with an unexpected touch of humour, which brought a suggestion of a smile to many faces.

"Perhaps not, but she has not been my servant for nearly thirty years. Was Mrs. Dalgleish not kind to her?"

"I dinna ken. Miss Dempster said her voice was loud, and that she made a noise. She seemed feared at her when she was ill."

"So you filled up the gaps in the nursing, greatly to the anger of Mrs. Dalgleish?"

"If she could hae killed me she wad hae done it."

"Gently; but it helps us to understand the state of the domestic atmosphere. Tell me, was there any talk in the kitchen or elsewhere about Miss Dempster's money or her will?"

"They talked a lot, and Dalgleish was aye braggin' about what she would do when she got her fortune."

"Was there any talk upstairs—that is, did you ever hear Miss Harman or Miss Dempster talk about it?"

"Neyer; Miss Harman thocht very little about money. She said often to me: 'Money can never make happiness, Christina. Just see this house. It is better to be poor and happy, as I have been all my life up till now.'"

"You often saw the doctor. I suppose, when he came?"

"Every day."

"Did he ever speak to you?"

"Never unless he wantit something. He didna like me."

"Did you like him?"

Christina violently shook her head.

"Nane o' them liked him. I've heard Dalgleish say she wadna let him treat the cat, if she had wan. They were aye on his tap."

"But Miss Dempster believed in him?"

"I couldna say."

"And Miss Harman?"

"She never said anything to me, sir. She was a leddy that kent her place and I was but a servant lass, but I liket her. I used to look at her face, and efter the doctor had been there it was a different face."

"Can you explain yourself a little better?"

"I mean she lookit troubled, as if there were a lot o' things she couldna understand. She was very glad when the ither doctor came."

"Did you see him?"

"Yes, sir. We were telt that Professor Gardiner frae the University was comin', but when he came, he kent him as the doctor in Rankeillour Street. A'boddy about the Pleasance kent him."

"Was he respected there?"

"They liked him. He was very kind to puir folks, and he was skilly, too, when he was sober."

"Sober? Do you mean to suggest that Dr. Ruthven would call into consultation on such an important case a man who was seldom sober?"

"Dr. Gardiner came, sir; him that lived at Rankeillour Street, and, though he lookit sober that night and was dressed up as naeboddy in the Pleasance had ever seen him, he wasna sober, for I saw him gann down the stairs."

"This seems extraordinary. Did Miss Harman see this strange consultant?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did she say about him? Anything?"

"She said she liked him, and she went to her ain bed that night mair peaceful like than I had seen her at the time o' Miss Dempster's illness."

"Still more extraordinary. Then Miss Harman went to her own bed that night, and you had no further opportunity of being in the sickroom? I suppose Mrs. Dalgleish dispensed with your services?"

"Yes, sir."

"What happened then?"

"I went up to my bed at the usual time, after I had seen to the fires and taken up a tea-tray for Miss Harman."

"Well?"

He waited suggestively, observing that she had still something to communicate. "You went up to bed at the usual time. Were you disturbed in the night?"

"No; but I didna stop in it."

"What did you do?"

"I waited till my neebor was sleepin', then I got up and went doon the stair."

"For what purpose?"

CHAPTER XLIII

THE UNEXPECTED

CHRISTINA hesitated just a moment, and her colour slightly rose.

"I wanted to watch Mrs. Dalglish."

"Watch her? Why? Did you suspect her of any thing in particular?"

"No, sir, I jist wantit to watch her. I canna explain it oay better."

"Did you think Miss Harman would have been pleased had she known? Perhaps you arranged it with her?"

The colour flushed hot and strong then in the girl's face, and her eyes flashed fire.

"Miss Harman kent naething aboot it. If she had she wad hae forbidden me, that was why I didna tell her, then or efter."

"Do you mean to say you never told Miss Harman, even a'fter Miss Dempster's death?"

"I never told her. The first time I ever spoke of it was to Dr. Guthrie the mornin' after I heard that my mistress had been put in jail."

"Then what was your motive in doing this underhand action, of which you say your mistress would not have approved? Was it merely to satisfy your own idle curiosity?"

"No, I didna care wan way or another. It was naething to me; it was for my mistress—Miss Har-

man, I mean. I felt that they were a' against her, and I had to watch."

"What did you expect to discover?"

"I didna ken."

"Did you discover anything then?"

"Yes, sir."

"You did? Begin at the beginning. At what time did you go downstairs to take up your self appointed duty of watcher in the dark?"

"Eleeven o'clock rang as I was on the stairs. Grace was a long time o'fa'ip' asleep."

"You went into the dressing-room?"

"Yes, sir, and hid behind the screen. There was nae licht there, but the licht was full up in the bedroom, and it shone in."

"What could you see from the dressing-room?"

"Only the fireplace and the window, and the press in the corner opposite the door."

"Could you see Mrs. Dalgleish?"

"Yes, when I got there she was tryin' keys in the press door."

"Which Miss Harman kept locked?"

"Yes, she had the key. I saw her keys on her dressing-table when I took the tray up to her room."

"Then you suggest that Mrs. Dalgleish was trying her own or other keys?"

"She was. She had twa big bunches. She tried at least twenty afore she got it open."

"Well, what then?"

"She looked at everything. She took oot the bottles wan by wan and the box."

"What box?"

"That box," said the girl unexpectedly, pointing to the medicine-chest which stood on the counsellor's table.

"Oh, that box! Did she take things out of it? What sort of things?"

"Bottles, and held them up to the licht. She smelt some of them. Then she put it back and opened some

letters that were in a little basket on the shelf—Miss Harman's letters. I saw her put them by when I was cleaning up the fireplace. They were English letters."

"So Mrs. Dalgleish had a look at them all?"

"Yes, and afore she had finished the bell rang, and she went doon to let the doctor in."

"What time was that?"

"Five-and-twenty meenits to twelve. I could see the mistress's carriage clock on the mantelpiece, and the half-hour rang as she went doon."

"The doctor returned with her?"

"Yes, they cam' back thegither."

"Not suspecting you were there?"

"No, sir, they never saw or heard me."

"But you remained?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear them speak?"

"Yes, they didna say much. The doctor didna gang near the bed nor look at Miss Dempster; he opened the press door first. She had telt him aboot it afore they came up."

"Did he also examine the things?"

"Yes, he took oot everything. He was long at the box, and he said to Dalgleish that he didna like it, and that onything might go into that box or come oot of it. These were his very words. He said that he wished he could take away the bottles and test them."

"Did Mrs. Dalgleish make any reply?"

"Yes, she said he should take them away one by one like, as she had a key that could aye open the door."

"What happened then?"

"He was a long time lookin' at the bottles and things, then he set them doon, and went ower to the bed. He said Miss Dempster was very cauld, and sent Dalgleish to the kitchen for hot water."

"Well, and then?"

She pressed her hand to her heart a second, and bit her lip. Mr. Warburton had impressed upon her that

she must have all her wits about her when she reached this portion of her recital, which was of the first importance—in fact, the one item upon which everything would depend. It was a recollection of that warning, and a full realisation of all it might mean for her mistress, which moved her out of her usual calm, even recital. Counsel, watching keenly, noticed her momentary faltering, but did not attribute it to the proper cause.

"He took something in a blue paper frae his pocket, and standing at the table mixed it in a glass of water. It was a white powder."

"You are sure it was a powder?"

"Yes, a white powder out of a blue paper."

"What did he do then?"

"He went to the bed, and gave it to Miss Dempster."

"How did you know? You have already explained the position of the room. You could not see the bed from the dressing-room?"

"I could see it in the glass above the mantelpiece. I saw him raise up Miss Dempster, and give her the medicine."

"What happened then?"

"He went to the press, and took out the box he had been lookin' at before."

"Well?"

"He opened it, and put in the blue packet that he had taken Miss Dempster's medicine out of. He put it in the box in one of the little drawers."

"A blue paper like this?"

Counsel lifted the box while a distinct thrill ran through the Court.

The lid was lifted, the little drawer opened, and he took out a small packet wrapped in blue paper.

"That was the thing. It had a pink string on it like thrt. It's the very same."

"What happened after that?"

"He shut it, and put it back; then he locked the press door, and Dalgleish came back."

id he say anything to Mrs. Dalgloish about what
ad done?

He said he had given her her medicine, and he went
away immediately, at least after he had put the hot
bottles in the bed. Then when they went down the
stair I ran back to my bed."

"Next day Miss Dempster died. Did you tell any
one of what you had seen?"

"Naebody. I spoke of it for the first time to Dr.
Guthrie, as I said, the day Miss Harman was taken to
the jail."

There was a pause in the proceedings, after which the
cross-examination was begun. It was very long and
searching, undertaken by one of the cleverest counsel
at the bar, but it failed to shake even in the smallest
particular the evidence already given. Christina was
in all three hours in the witness-box.

At last she was informed that she could stand down.

As she passed out she looked straight at Miss Har-
man, who made a slight gesture with her hand, her
eyes so eloquent that Christina went out with her own
running with tears. Outside she sank down exhausted
and trembling in terror lest she had not done enough or
had left unsaid anything that might have helped.

She need not have been afraid. After her evidence
there was a distinct revulsion of feeling, and popular
interest and suspicion shifted into entirely a new groove.
The Ruthvans, who had a paid watcher in Court, received
due warning how the case was going. They hailed the
nearest cab, and drove off to the lawyer's chambers in
St. Andrew Street.

They could only look at one another in blank dismay.

"It's all up, Pat. I saw it in their faces," said old
Ruthvan heavily. "We'd better clear before it's too late."

Patrick sat down, and wiped his livid face, unable to
speak a word.

"If I'd known she carried all that inside her, I'd have
found ways and means to throttle her long ago," he

said savagely. "Gad, the blow always comes from the unexpected quarter. Who would have thought that that guttersnipe would be the one to spoke our wheel at the last?"

"There's no use talking about it; we've got to act, Pat. You'd better go down to Leith to-night, and take the boat to Holland. I looked it up, and it sails at ten o'clock. I'll come another way, and join you somewhere abroad in a day or two, then we'll get off to America by one of the North German boats from Bremen or some of those ports. I've sent a draft to Torrey in New York, and if you get there first you'll find it ready for you."

"Daddy Rossland's money, guv.," said Pat, with a faint, bitter smile.

"Yes, here's the rest of it, ninety-three pounds, all I have in hand. There it is. Go and pack what you need, but don't burden yourself."

"Do you think such haste necessary? There'll be three days of it yet."

"Yes, but it's all up with us, and I question if after Guthrie and the rest of them's been through the mill whether we won't be in limbo. I saw mischief in more eyes than one. I know what I'm talking about this time, Pat; I don't make mistakes in my business, and I know my men."

Pat passed over the reproach in silence.

"What are you going to do? Have you enough for yourself?" he asked, as he fingered the notes.

"Plenty, I shan't need much; the main lot's in the draft. You'll get it from Torrey directly you land. They won't catch me, and in any case they can't hang me. It's your neck we've got to save."

Pat grew livid again, and put the notes in his pocket, curiously silent.

There was absolutely nothing to say, and though his mind was full of unspeakable thoughts he had no desire to utter them.

"I've got some things to settle up here, and if I get through in time I'll see you off at Leith. But if I don't turn up don't worry. I'll be safer not to hunt in couples. Good-bye, lad; it's a ghastly pity our luck has turned. I don't mind for myself. It's rough on you at your age."

"I'll get over it at the other side," said Pat, with affected lightness. "Try and come down if you can."

"I will; but don't be disappointed if you don't see me. It's safer not. I tell you I'll be busy here till late. I'll probably get away in the morning south or maybe to Glasgow, and get a steamer direct. We may get twenty-four hours' start, not a moment more."

Pat slightly shivered as he opened the door on to the landing.

His father's hand closed it again, and he drew him back a moment into the inner room.

"Good-bye, lad. Forgive me for the part I've played. We've had the devil's own luck all our lives, both of us. I hope you'll do better in the new country."

"I mean to. I'm not done yet, and they shan't catch me, guv. I'll finish myself first."

"Right you are. I don't blame you. Good-bye."

Their hands met. There was no emotion visible on the younger man's face, he was cold-blooded and selfish to the core. But when the door closed the old man groaned and fell upon his knees.

Thus they found him at the grey close of another day, dead on the very spot where he had fallen. So passed the Ruthvens clear out of Edinburgh life and knowledge, and were heard of no more for ever. Patrick, laid his plans well, reached New York in time to lay his hands on the money of which his father had spoken, and managed to elude the vigilance of the law until he was beyond its jurisdiction, and there it will not serve our purpose to follow him.

CHAPTER XLIV

A HAPPY RESULT

THE third day's proceedings were partly occupied by the examination of the few remaining witnesses for the defence. Of these the only serious evidence was given by Dr. Guthrie, whose standing in Edinburgh made his words carry weight. His testimony, given with much force and power, helped to drive home the conviction left by the first witness, namely, that an innocent girl had been made the victim of a vile and wicked conspiracy.

When the Court reassembled after luncheon, the speaker for the prosecution began. It was in its way a masterly bit of work, but it seemed as if the author himself lacked that conviction which drives an argument home; that he was pursued throughout by its futility.

Anyhow it failed to impress as he had expected it would when it was prepared.

The third day closed, and with it a warrant was issued for the arrest of Patrick Ruthven, precisely as his father predicted.

Next morning Mess, the prisoner's counsel, at great length and in most impassioned terms spoke for the defence.

He was a young man with his mark to make; undoubtedly it was made that day.

His moving picture of the sufferings undergone by Miss Harman drew tears from many unaccustomed

eyes, and it seemed to all present that the verdict must be a foregone conclusion.

At its close the Lord-Justice-Clerk rose and briefly charged the jury before they retired to consider their verdict. . .

Then occurred that awful period of suspense in which surely many a sin must have been fully expiated. Alice sat still.

Her face seemed to have become more ivory white, but her eyes had lost none of their clear brightness. It was a wonderful face, steadfast, calm, and beautiful exceedingly, a face that was never forgotten by those who had seen it during these trying and interminable days. . .

Her composure, her incomparable dignity had never faltered; it was as if she were supported and upheld by some light from within.

All her friends were grouped about her as near as they were permitted. Now that the examination of witnesses was concluded, all embargoes had been removed. The faithful Teen had the place of honour close behind the dock, so that she could speak to and touch the mistress she loved.

Teen had suffered in that ordeal to the outward eye even more than any of them: her bonnie hair had whitened at the temples, and looked strangely incongruous with the pathetic young face. . .

The suspense happily for all concerned was not that day prolonged. The jury were absent from the Court exactly twelve minutes by the clock.

When they entered the crowd quickly scanned their faces, trying to ascertain the result. But the fifteen good men and true kept an admirable control of their expression.

Judge and counsel rose to receive them. Those near enough observed a slight tremor on the usually impassive and strong face of the Lord-Justice-Clerk. He faced the foreman, and spoke the impressive words,

"Gentlemen of the jury, have you agreed upon your verdict?"

"We have, my Lord."

"We wait to hear it."

"We are absolutely unanimous, my Lord in finding the prisoner not guilty of the charge, and we ask to be allowed to add as a rider an expression of the hope that those wicked and unscrupulous persons who have originated this monstrous charge should be brought to the justice they deserve."

The applause burst forth in an extraordinary shout. Remonstrance, sharp reproof were in vain. The happy and excited crowd would have its way. Women and even strong men wept as if they had themselves been personally and intimately interested in the issue of the day.

It was a scene quite unparalleled in the annals of that grey old Court, and was never forgotten by those who witnessed it.

At last the tall, impassive and moving figure of the Lord-Justice-Clerk commanded the silence fitting to the moment.

A very humane man himself, he had observed that the emotion of the crowd had its being in the highest and most admirable characteristics of humanity, and that as such might have its way.

When silence was restored, he turned his fine face in the direction of the dock. Never had its strength been so tempered with benign feeling. It was indeed almost tender in its deep emotion.

"Prisoner at the bar stand up."

She stood up mechanically, as one who had little will power left, her frail, pale hands gripping the front of the dock.

"Alice Harman, after due consideration and deliberation, and taking into account all the evidence as it has been unfolded here from day to day, the jury have acquitted you of the foul and monstrous charge brought

against your blameless character by infamous persons. In this finding they will be supported by the whole world, who in common with us more intimately concerned have been with you through this fiery trial.

Madam, before you quit this Court with all its painful memories, may I be permitted to express the hope that life may yet compensate you for the sharp suffering you have endured here; that joys substantial and enduring may take the edge from these painful memories?

"For some inscrutable reason Providence permits much apparently mysterious suffering to overtake His creatures. May He in whose hands are the final scales of justice uphold and compensate you for all you have suffered here."

He stepped down from the bench with extended hand.

But she did not see it. The last words, with their expressive and pathetic beauty, had fallen upon deaf ears.

She fell back in her seat. In a moment the faithful servant was at her side, and the little company of those who loved her closed about her, and bore her away from prying eyes for ever.

An English servant in a neat black gown and a muslin apron stood at the door of a picturesque little Swiss chalet, perched high on the side of a mountain in the Upper Engadine.

It was a day of heavenly mood, a June day, with a cloudless blue sky and sunshine which lay like living fire upon the snowy mountain peaks, and turned all the peaceful valley into burnished gold.

It was a lonely and beautiful spot far from the madding crowd, a place surely in which the riven heart might be restored by the incomparable healing of Nature herself.

The girl had watched long as if for some desired good, and at last was rewarded by the sight of the

diligence in the far distance, like a black speck crawling up the mountain side.

She was very young, with a sweet, kind face; many who saw her wondered to see the grey hair about the temples and an anxious line at times which seemed to recall some hidden sorrow.

Christina had scarcely recovered from the shock and strain of that awful winter. She would awake with a start sometimes in the night, and cry out even that she could not save her mistress. Sometimes she feared she had saved her to little purpose. As yet Alice Harman had not come back to her normal state, and took but little interest in what was passing around her. She had now been five weeks in Switzerland in the care of her kind friends the O'Briens, and it would have been hard to say which was the most anxious of the three.

Christina had a special purpose in watching the arrival of the diligence that day, for she had taken a great deal upon herself. She had written a letter to Scotland, setting forth certain things therein, and she expected the answer in person. Nor was she disappointed.

As the diligence drew near the little inn and stopping-place some five hundred yards down the slope, she ran to watch the passengers alight. There was only one, a tall broad figure of a man, in tweed travelling clothes of the familiar British make. At sight of him tears of gratitude coursed freely down the cheeks of Christina Caldwell.

"He smiled at sight of her, and approached with extended hand.

"If I could thank you I would lass," he said simply. "You've done a lot for her; now it's your turn to do something for me."

"Oh, I wasna thinkin' on you, sir, but on her," she answered, with that unpromising candor which sometimes got her into uncomfortable places.

"Well, it's the same thing, or will be, I hope. How is she now?"

"Just about the same. She has na interest in ony-thing. Something will hae to be done for her, see; Mrs. O'Brien thinks the same, but she did naething, was only Teen left."

"A very good only, lass," he answered. "Where is she—Miss Harman, I mean?"

"In the little wood there behind the hoose. There's a seat there whaur she sits for hours looking straicht afore her, never speakin'. I'm liké to gang mad when I see her."

"I'll try and get her to speak. It was thought wise she should get away from us all for a time, you see."

"It was a mistake. I thocht it at the time. When's the rest comin'?"

The question partly amused him, as if the whole world, their little world at least, existed for the benefit of Alice Harman.

"Next week Mr. and Mrs. King, the children, and Dr. Guthrie."

"Dr. Guthrie, eh, mighty! an' thank God! He'll fix' everything richt!"

"Have you any idea what he is coming for, Teen?"

She shook her head; and he turned then and pointed to a tiny curious little spire, like a pepper pot, far down in the valley.

"That's the English Church. I've been inquireing. There's going to be a wedding there, I hope, in a few weeks' time. That's what's bringing Dr. Guthrie here."

"Eh, mighty! an' thank God!" repeated Teen, her tears welling again.

He nodded, and she standing still watched him striding away towards the green belt of the pinewoods.

"He's very maisterfu', eh, mighty! I like them like that!" she muttered, and for the first time the burden of responsibility seemed to be lifted clean off her shoulders.

He found her in the spot that Teen had said—a slim, very slim figure, in a white frock scarcely whiter than

her face, sitting looking straight down the valley into space. She started at the sound of the step among the crackling undergrowth, and when she saw him she was pale no longer. He did not wait, but gathered her up close to his heart, and held her with strong protecting arms which would keep all hurt or harm from her for ever more.

"My darling!" was all he said.

"Why were you so long?" she asked piteously. "I have been lonely here. I needed you."

"My darling!" he repeated. "Forgive me; I can never forgive myself. Perhaps it was a foolish pride."

"Pride! What have we to do with pride, you or me?" she asked wonderingly. "Mine has been down in the dust; it will never rise again."

"Yes, yes, it was not your pride, nor you at all. Let us forget that horrible nightmare, Alice."

"I never shall. It will walk with me to the end of my life," she said, and sought to draw herself away, but he held her fast. "I forgot I meant to be brave: to return you the promise made in the dark days. I would not burden your life. You are made for brightness and happiness. You were good to me then; it helped me in the darkness; but now I am fit to be wife to no man."

"I'm the best judge of that, dear one," he answered, and did not let her go.

"Tell me how they are—dear Lucy, and the boys, and little Maidie. Sometimes I have a horrible nightmare that Lucy will never let me see or touch the little ones again."

Traquair was silent a moment, grave to sadness. He saw what a gigantic mistake it had been to cut her off, even though the medical advice had been to that effect. He could have cursed himself for his lack of foresight.

"They're all coming next week—Tom and Lucy, and the lads, and Maidie, and Dr. Guthrie."

"Dr. Guthrie! Why is he coming?"

"Well, partly to see you, and partly to—to—well because we can't do without him. Do you see that little spire down there?"

"Yes."

"The English Church, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I have never been in it."

"Nor have I, but that's no reason why we shouldn't enter it one day together. We'll go down and have a look at it to-morrow morning to get familiar with it before we attempt the service."

"What service?"

"The only service which has any interest for me at present. Look here, darling," he said, dropping on one knee so that he could look uninterruptedly into her face. "We've had enough of this fooling about with big things. They're not getting you well. I've stood aside, this ghastly money standing between us like a nightmare, but I'm done with it. I've come to marry you, to hold you to the word you spoke that night by the Blenken Loch. I've a feeling that our own hills will make you well."

"I'm fit to be wife to no man now," she repeated, but her eyes belied her words.

"I'm the judge in this case. Oh! and the Lord-Justice hopes to be here in time to give you away, so you'll have quite an imposing wedding without the wedding garments unless there's anything they can make here."

She smiled with the first gleam of her old self she had seen.

"How did you know to come at the right moment?"

He rose a little shamefacedly.

"I didn't know, blind beggar that I am: we owe you this to that little brick Christina, God bless her!"

He took his cap from off his head as he spoke her name, and a tender, tremulous smile crept to the lips of Alice.

"We must keep her always, Jack."

"Yes, at Blenkenfoot; you're coming there, aren't you? It's the place where you would like to live? I leave that and my life in your hands."

"Oh, you mustn't do that, Jack. It is I who need to be taken and guided and looked after."

But he only smiled.

"I foresee the day," he said, with a touch of the old mischievous smile, "when you will be working drastic changes at Blenkenfoot, and even, who knows, trying to drain the loch."

Suddenly her face became grave again.

"The house at George Square has been sold, I have heard from the agents. I shall never enter it again, and the money is to go to Dr. Guthrie. Do you know what I should like to do, Jack?"

"Speak, and it is done."

"Spend it all in that way. It was the money that was the curse. I want to get rid of it. They are happier who are poor."

"Please yourself, darling. It's what I should like. I'm poor enough, but I can't say I'm not proud, and if you can be satisfied with Blenkenfoot I should be the happiest man on earth."

"Then when Dr. Guthrie comes you'll let me speak about it to him."

"Certainly, whatever you like."

She rose suddenly, and it was as if some intolerable burden had rolled away from her heart for ever. She placed her two slim hands on his shoulders, and kissed him.

"Now I know you love me," was all she said.

THE END.

